Tintin and the Men in the Mirrors

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Tintin and the Men in the Mirrors

by lholt34

Summary

FORMERLY "THE MAN IN THE MIRROR." Tintin has come a long way from the girl who always wore the dresses her mother told her to, the girl who danced with strange men at balls and made it her duty to be the perfect young lady. Tintin has kept his past a secret for a reason, so he could leave that girl behind, but a new case may cause his old life to come back and haunt him. Updates every Monday at...some point in the day.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

"Not again," Mother sighed in dismay. She looked at me with disappointment in her eyes, I hung my head. She said, "Just last month I had to deal with you stealing your father's razor and shaving your hair off, now this?" She gestured to the torn trousers I'd stolen from Jacques' son.

She took me by my wrist and led me upstairs into the bathroom. I went without protest. She unbuttoned the shirt Cal had loaned me and pulled the trousers off, then set me in the bathtub. Most people of our monetary status had maids for this sort of thing, but Mother was from country people, and she didn't believe in letting a stranger raise your child. She said it was unnatural. "Honestly, I ought to tell your father about this. Maybe he'd set you straight," she said. I knew she wouldn't, she was just as afraid of Father's temper as I was. She raised my arms to rub harsh soap under them. "Why do you do this to us? People will start to think we have a son."

"I'm growing up and then I'll be your son," I said.

Mother stopped soaping my back. "Is that what this is all about?" She asked. "You think you're going to grow up and be a man?"

"I'm a girl right now, but I'll be a boy someday," I said.

Mother took my face between both hands and turned me to face her. Then she said the words I'd never forget--"Sweet, sweet Hannah. You will always be a girl."

Three loud knocks sound on my door. My eyes snap open, I sit up in bed. "Yes?" I call.

"Get up," The Captain's grumpy voice answers. "We've got to talk to the Gypsies."

I rub my eyes and drag myself out of bed. Snowy, disrupted by my movement, yawns and whines. "I know, I know," I say. I hop out of bed and go to the bathroom attached to my room. I brush my teeth, comb my hair and push it up into its quiff, then hesitate, staring at myself in the mirror.

My face is round as ever, with no trace of stubble, and my cheeks have their usual rosy tint. Every morning I wake up hoping that I'll have somehow changed overnight, that my face will be long and lean and I'll suddenly have a use for the untouched straight razor in the glass cup by the sink. Of course, that never happens.

I pull on the short, tight canvas undershirt I sewed while on a trip to the Arctic, button up my shirt, zip my trousers. I stare at myself in the wardrobe's full-length mirror when I'm dressed.

There are my skinny shoulders, baby face, slightly noticeable hips…I scowl at my reflection and pull up my socks.

“You alright in there, lad?” Captain’s voice asks from outside the door.

“Coming!” I call back. I grab my coat and unlock the door, Snowy wagging his tail, hot on my heels. Haddock raises his eyebrows at me, and I feel suddenly self-conscious.

Captain just grumbles, “Let’s get outside, before those blithering baboons take over the grounds,” *Oh, thank heavens,* I think. “All that blasted music, I can’t even sleep.”

“Oh, we both know you’ve a soft spot for the Gypsies,” I say, smiling as I pull my coat on. Haddock just mumbles something unintelligible in reply. We walk down the marble stairs. Nestor is dusting the antiques in the entrance hall, he nods at us as we walk out the door. I add, “You invited them to stay, if you recall.”

“They ought to get off the grounds before all your fans show up,” Haddock says gruffly. “I won’t stand for Marlinspike looking like a campground in all the papers.”

“They will think we are clearly great philanthropists,” I say. The leaves crunch under our feet. It’s early autumn and a little chilly, but still beautiful. Early morning light is just beginning to break over the hill, faint strains of music can be barely heard from the woods. Haddock’s just looking for something to complain about, I know. I’ve seen him dancing to that music when he thought I wasn’t looking.

When the Gypsy camp comes into view, a boy spots us and runs over. “Old man, old man!” he calls.

“Old man? I’m thirty,” Haddock complains. I suppress a smile. He might be young, but he’s so crotchety even at thirty, between that and the alcohol it’s no wonder that children think he’s older. Haddock’s been more sensitive about his age since my twenty-fifth a month ago.

“Miss Maarah wants your boy to find us a chicken,” the boy says. He gives me a big, gap-toothed grin.

“I’m my own boy,” I say, chuckling. “And besides, I’m a detective, not a magician.”

The boy shrugs his scrawny shoulders. “To Miss Maarah, same thing,” he says. “After you found that lady’s jewels, she thinks you find anything.”

“I don’t know about a chicken,” I say. “Maybe he doesn’t want to be found.”

The boy squints up at me, then runs back to his family. Haddock shakes his head. “They’re ridiculous folk, all of them,” he says with a sigh. Snowy barks agreement.

I’m too busy watching the boy, talking to his parents. He says something, his mother laughs, his father draws his son in for a hug. I feel jealousy course through me. *You don’t know what you have,* I think.

“Tintin!” Haddock says, startling me.

“Mm?”

“Did you not just hear me? We have to go talk to them,” he says.

“Why can’t they stay?” I ask. “They’ve nowhere else to go.”

Haddock frowns. “I didn’t want to say this,” he says. He leans in to conspiratorially whisper, “I don’t want them in trouble for being here. If the police get wind of it…you understand? Might not be good for them.”

I nod. “Well, we’ll just tell them to make themselves scarce,” I say.

“Of course I wasn’t going to kick them off the grounds,” Haddock says with an impatient snort. “I just planned to tell them to hide. Little cleverclogs, sometimes you’re thick as a brick wall.”

He walks off in a huff, muttering under his breath about how he would never be the kind of cad to do that. I grin and follow my friend, Snowy yapping at my heels. I imagine he’s barking*, Let’s play fetch! Let’s run!* As we get closer, voices become clearer, and a delicious smell of cooking food fills the air. Standing next to the tents and wagons, Haddock is already talking to a dark-eyed young man.

“Look, you don’t have to leave, you just have to hide out for a little while, until all the racket at the mansion dies down,” Captain says. The man relays the information to an older woman, who nods. “Understand?” Captain asks. “They’ll be showing up soon, in all their fancy cars, and they’re going to want pictures of the grounds. If you lay low for a while you should be able to avoid them.”

The woman nods again after hearing the message in Romani, then she turns around and picks up a plate with a hunk of rough bread on it, and two fried eggs. She holds it out to Haddock, clearly inviting him to take the plate. Haddock tries to refuse at first, but she keeps jabbing the plate at him, and he eventually takes it, as well as a broken fork. He surrenders with a sigh, and sits down on the dewy grass. The Gypsies take food very seriously, and rarely take no for an answer. If you go to visit them, prepare to be fed, with force if necessary. I accept a similar plate from the boy who spoke to us earlier, sit down next to Haddock. Snowy gets a juicy bone from a woman tending the fire, and we eat with the Gypsies talking rapidly amongst themselves

“Cheerful lot, aren’t they?” Haddock asks, biting into the bread.

“Yes,” I say. “Oh, you’ve got crumbs in your beard.”

Haddock swipes at his dark beard, scowling. “Confound this thing,” he says. “I don’t know why I don’t just shave it off and be done with it.”

“A beard isn’t such a bad thing,” I say with a laugh. *If only you knew,* I think. *If I could, I’d grow a beard down to my knees.* I say, “You’d look younger if you shaved it. Like a boy.”

“Like you,” Haddock says good-naturedly. “Bet I wouldn’t get called ‘old man,’ then.”

I smile and slurp the runny yolk of a fried egg. It's peaceful and pleasant right now, but I know what's coming. When we finish our breakfasts, we get to our feet and walk back to Marlinspike. Snowy totes his bone, not wanting to part ways with it. There are already three cars in the drive, brightly colored, announcing, *We are here! Look at us!* The mansion seems to loom. Since Haddock inherited the estate and began to take care of it, I've never viewed it as menacing, but now, in the early sunlight, it looks just as gloomy and ominous as the day I first saw it.

"Are you ready?" Haddock asks. He knows I dislike my personal life being probed into, though he doesn't know why.

"As I'll ever be," I answer, and we walk into the house together.

The interviews are obscene. We're in the den, reporters in a semicircle around me. Haddock stands in the corner and smokes a pipe, my moral support. I find myself wondering how Castafiore even managed to dredge up this many reporters. She must have been interviewed in every country on the planet.

After I found her emeralds, Castafiore wanted to "drum up business" for me, as she put it, so she contacted all her friends in the press and insisted they all interview me, despite my repeated insistence that interviews are the last thing I want.

"Nonsense, dear, all press is good press," she said when I told her yet again that I didn't want people talking about me in every paper around the world. "Besides, it's the least I can do after you found my treasure. You'll be a star! Everybody will want you to work for them, and you know what that means—everybody will be paying you."

I suppose she meant well, but when the interviewer, a particularly persistent young female reporter, asks if there's a "Mrs. Tintin" out there somewhere, I want to go back in time and let Castafiore's emeralds stay lost.

"No, there isn't," I say with an uneasy laugh. There are certain aspects of my life I'm uncomfortable speaking about—for instance, almost everything personal.

"Any romantic interests?" a man with slicked-back hair asks. Haddock raises his bushy eyebrows at me as if to say, *Should I throw him out?* Gratitude rushes through me.

"Maybe soon," I say, my default answer whenever Mrs. Finch asks, or Thompson and Thomson. Honestly, the romance department is something I refuse to go anywhere near. I locked up everything romantic into a small box I like to imagine is lodged somewhere beneath my ribs, and I haven't taken out those feelings in years.

After that, the questions turn to more benign things, until the girl (damn her) asks, "What about your parents? How do they feel about your recent successes as a reporter and a detective?"

"I don't think they care much," I say, trying to keep it light. Haddock pulls the bill of his hat down over his forehead—I've seen him employ this tactic whenever he's about to punch somebody's lights out. He says it makes him blend into the background a bit more.

A different reporter with graying hair and a paunch laughs, incredulous. “Surely they have something to say, you might be the most famous young man in all of Europe!”

“I’m afraid not,” I answer.

“Are you no longer in touch with them?” the woman asks.

“Don’t be ridiculous, even if he weren’t, they’d surely see his name in the papers,” the paunchy man says before I can reply. “Unless they live in bloody Niger.”

“You could say that I’m no longer in touch with them,” I say, trying to handle the situation delicately. I don’t have trouble staying poised when I’m tied to a railroad track, but reporters are another matter.

“How so?” a different reporter calls from the back of the room.

“They died,” I say abruptly. Haddock snaps up his head to look at me. He’s never heard this in all the years I’ve known him, because it’s a lie—technically. But I keep going with it, spinning my story for the reporters. “They died when I was fifteen, I was put in the care of my Aunt Rebecca. Now, may we please talk about something else?” I snap.

The room hushes. When the questions resume, they’re hesitant, nervous, and they only deal with superficial matters, which I’m grateful for. Finally, when I say I need to get lunch, they pack up their recorders and their cameras and start to trickle out of the house. I watch as a few of them snap photographs of the Marlinspike grounds, where I’ve been staying for the past two weeks for fear of getting mobbed by journalists. But at least I got it over with all at once.

I don’t relax until the last car leaves the drive. Then I sigh, tension rushing out of my shoulders. Haddock walks up to me. “I didn’t know your parents died, lad,” he says, too casually. There’s an element of tenderness to his tone, which I hate.

“Yes, well, there are lots of things you don’t know about me,” I say, knowing I’m being too harsh. The encounter with the reporters absolutely rattled me. I hope I’m not like that, as a journalist.

“Aye,” Haddock says. “Don’t I know it.”

I walk away, leaving Haddock standing alone in the room. Snowy looks like he’s torn between following me or staying with Haddock, but in the end trails me up to my room. I sit down on the bed and sigh, pushing the heels of my palms into my eyes.

“What a mess I am, eh, Snowy?” I ask. I rub the dog behind the ears. He looks up to me, his big brown eyes trusting. “You’re the only one who knows what a mess I am.”

Snowy nestles his head against my legs. I sit on the edge of my bed and watch out the window. A strong breeze blows through the brown-leaved trees, causing a few leaves to fall to the ground. I don’t know what words I can use to express the way I feel like those trees, but Snowy knows, and that’s all that matters.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My father had to come collect me and Cal from the elderly couple a few streets down from us, who had caught us sneaking through their apple orchards. The ride back was ominously quiet. Sitting in the backseat of the car, Cal twined fingers with me. I smiled at him, grateful for the comfort.

"Your mother must be worried about you," Father said, voice gruff. "What possessed you children to do such a silly thing?"

"We were investigating," I piped up.

"I'm asking the boy," Father said.

I wanted to ask, Why aren't you asking me? *But I knew better, so I shut my mouth and turned to Cal. Cal said, "Hannah's right. We were investigating. The guard dog stopped barking last week."*

"Oh? And what is that supposed to mean?" Father asked.

Cal gulped. "Well, that dog always barks when you pass, it's a mean little thing. You know, the Watsons keep it to watch the apple orchard, make sure no bums is getting in and stealing, then last week it stopped barking, and we ran past a couple of times to make sure but it's really not barking. That's the third dog this month."

"Callum, I know you're the stableboy's son, but that doesn't mean you have to be a total imbecile," Father says. "That's Hannah's job."

Cal looked down. I could see his face reddening in the dim light. Father continued, "Now, does anybody want to give me an answer that actually makes sense?"

I decided to take the risk and pipe up. "The Watsons' dogs are dying. I think they're being poisoned."

"Don't be ridiculous, why would anyone want to do that?" Father asked. He scoffed at my silence. "Well? Little Miss, care to answer? Who would care enough to poison dogs?"

This time, Cal spoke, quietly. "Somebody very, very hungry."

Father looked over his shoulder at Cal, then gave a 'hmph' sound and turned back to the road. "Well, I don't care. It looks like you're the one poisoning the dogs, and a lot of mess besides. I want you staying out of it. Both of you. I can't have you giving my house a bad reputation as well, Callum."

"Yes, sir," we said in unison.

We were silent the rest of the way home, Father stopped a little away from our house to let Cal out at the servants' quarters, then we continued to the main house. He parked in the drive and turned around to speak to me. "Listen, Hannah," he said. "Cal is not proper company for a young woman to keep."

"Because he's a stableboy's son?" I asked. My voice was timid but I tried to keep my chin up.

"Because he's a boy," Father said, sounding irritated. "A little girl should be playing with other little girls, not scuffing around orchards with the lads. Why don't you play with the maids' daughters?"

"They're boring," I said, slouching down. "All they do is play dolls, never anything fun."

Father looked taken aback at that, but he recovered his composure. "Well, you could at least act like a proper girl, wear skirts everywhere and, I don't know, sing in the church choir. You're going to be a woman someday, it's about time you started acting like one."

I was silent. Father rubbed his moustache, said, "I'm not going to forbid you from spending time with the boy. No, I know that if I did, you would just sneak out to meet him, or something. But from now on, you don't leave the house unless you're wearing a skirt. You are taking etiquette lessons every Thursday until you find a husband and leave my house. You will only be allowed outside three hours a day, including horseback riding. No more running, no more fishing with Cal, or rock-skipping, or whatever it is you do. You will play with the girls as well as Cal. My wife gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, and I will be damned if I let her muck about like an uncivilized boyish cretin." Father took a deep breath, calmed himself. "Is that understood?"

In my eyes, my world dwindled. I saw myself restricted to the house, skirts, boring etiquette lessons. I saw Cal moving away from me, towards the boys who were fun, rather than the girl who had to stay inside all day. I curled a lock of red hair around my finger. I wanted to cry. I said, "I understand."

"I understand, sir*," Father corrected me.*

"I understand. Sir."

After the slew of interviews, things went back to normal—almost. I was in the papers for a couple of weeks, then finally, the press seemed to run out of things to print about me. I cautiously moved back into my flat with Snowy, though he seemed to miss the long Marlinspike runs. And after the initial "Oh, good Lord—you're him!" reactions, people stopped noticing me again.

Then the calls and telegrams started. Mostly directed to Marlinspike, thank heavens I didn't mention my flat in the interviews. I routinely got telephone calls from Haddock to "Come

back here, boy," eventually followed by an invitation to rejoin him at Marlinspike for the time being.

"It is about time," Haddock says when I arrive on his doorstep. "I'm tired of these blithering bandits running about the house."

"Glad to be back," I said with a smile. Snowy hared past me into the mansion, probably chasing the cat. I make to catch him, but Haddock catches my elbow and shrugs.

"Bloody cat, probably deserves it anyway," he says. I raise an eyebrow at him and nod, walking in with my case.

"It's only been two weeks, you really can't go without me, can you?" I say with a grin.

"Cheeky little ragamuffin," Haddock grumbles. "It's just as well, or I'd throttle you for being so smug all the time."

"Smug? Me? Never," I say, walking up the staircase with him to my usual room.

"Good evening, sir!" Nestor calls as we walk up.

"Evening, Nestor!" I call back.

"Don't know why you bother moving out, you spend so much time here it's like you live here full-time," Haddock says.

"I've got my own place," I say, laughing. I walk into my room and set the suitcase down on the bed. I keep my room simple, just a bed, a wardrobe, a writing desk and chair. I know that Nestor supports this as well, it's less to clean.

"Ah, right," Haddock says. "You're welcome here whenever you want, boy. I hope you know that."

"Of course," I say, raising an eyebrow at him. "Captain, it's only been a couple of weeks! You've gone on voyages longer than this, and I wasn't there for those, either."

"Even when I'm not here," Haddock says. "You're welcome. Nestor will let you into the mansion."

"I'll keep it in mind, thanks," I say, smiling.

Haddock lets out a frustrated sigh. "Thundering typhoons, I'm botching this beyond belief," he says, then turns on his heel and storms downstairs. I'm not sure what he means, but I set about unpacking my suitcase. Even if I'm only here for a short stay, I dislike living out of a suitcase. In my head, I hear my father's voice complaining, *No daughter of mine is going about like some vagrant!*

I push the voice from my head. Father's behind me, Mother's behind me—they all are. I won't go back to that life again. I'm not that girl anymore.

After I unpack my clothes, I go back downstairs to the dining room. It's a little tradition, the first night we always eat in the dining room, with its elaborate table and chandelier. It's a bit silly, sure, but we enjoy it nonetheless.

Haddock looks as though he's enjoying it a little too much. He's already halfway through a bottle of whiskey. When I give him a meaningful look, he says, "Don't you look at me like that, boy, this is a good year, and I don't intend to waste it!"

"Every year is a good year for you, Haddock!" I say, but I'm laughing. Captain is best when he's on the cusp of slurring and stammering, when the alcohol is enough to encourage him to joke, but not enough to turn him angry and petulant.

"Oh, hush, you," he says, then dissolves into muttering to himself. He swigs from a stemmed wine glass. *That's right, tonight we're fancy,* I think, amused.

I look around at the pink-painted walls, the high-arching beams overhead, the intricately carved table and crystal chandelier. *For a bunch of drunks, they did alright with the place*, I think. Snowy is nowhere in sight but I'm sure he's having a good time chasing after the cat, or getting under Nestor's feet some other way.

"Tomorrow, we need to make a house call," Haddock says, merry. He pours more whiskey, offers some to me.

"No, thanks," I say. Haddock shrugs and reclaims the glass, mumbling about how there's more for him. "Why do we have to make a house call?"

"Some woman, she's saying there are men in her mirrors," Haddock says.

"She sounds like she needs some psychiatric help," I say, sipping from a glass of water Nestor left for me.

Haddock swigs some more whiskey, I fight the urge to grimace. I can smell the alcohol across the table. "According to her, she's been to every psychiatrist in fifty miles," Captain says. "And she got a couple of the maids on the phone, they say they're seeing the men, as well. She's been very persistent."

"Oh? I'm intrigued," I say.

Nestor emerges from the kitchen, carrying dinner plates. Haddock thanks him—even drunk he has manners—and Nestor hurries back to the kitchen. I think he prefers to be there, so he doesn't have to listen to his employer's alcohol-induced rants.

"Thought you would be," Haddock says after Nestor's left the room. "That's why I told her we would be over first thing tomorrow."

"And where does she live, exactly?" I ask, cutting a piece of salmon. Nestor's really outdone himself tonight, the food is delicious.

"Hale," Haddock says, and I nearly choke on my food. "It's only a short drive east of here."

I cough and swallow. Haddock looks at me oddly. “Are you alright, lad?” he asks.

“F-fine, I’m perfectly fine,” I splutter. My mind is racing. There’s a part of me saying, *You couldn’t avoid it forever.* England’s a small country. It only makes sense that a case would eventually lead me back there. The other part is full of blaring alarms, panic. I work to calm myself. Sure, Hale’s a little town, as well. But what are the odds that you’ll meet up with—

“Oh, what’s the woman’s blasted name—Mrs. Pepper?” Haddock pauses to inspect his glass of whiskey, then continues, muttering, “No, that’s not it, it’s…”

“Pepall,” I say, sounding faint. I work to bolster my voice.

“Yes, that’s it!” Haddock crows. Then he hesitates. “How d’ye know that, lad?”

“I know her,” I say. Keep calm, keep calm. Just have to act like all’s well. Don’t dodge any of his questions, this doesn’t equate to a full confession. Just answer the best you can.

“How so?”

“I grew up in Hale,” I answer, and I’m proud of how steady my voice is.

“No!” Haddock says, incredulous.

“Yes,” I say, and allow a small smile to slip onto my face. “I was born in Hale, grew up there.”

“How’ve I never known this?” Haddock asks.

“Hale isn’t…a place I’d like to return to, that’s why,” I say, choosing my words carefully.

“Oh, always with the bloody riddles, boy!” Captain says, irked.

“I didn’t have a good childhood in Hale,” I say. I force myself to take a bite of the salmon. “In fact, it’s the kind of place that if I could completely forget it, I think I should be very happy.”

This throws Haddock for a loop. When he speaks again, he’s very quiet. “What happened to you, Tintin?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I answer. “In fact, I don’t—I don’t think I’ll be accompanying you tomorrow.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, boy,” Haddock says. I stare at my friend. His cheeks are flushed, but he’s still mostly coherent. I can only assume he knows what he’s saying. “You can’t waste your life running from your past, you’ve got to go back.”

“Why does it matter to you, it’s only a case!” I say, laughing. My heart is racing again, but I’m still calm. “It’s just some batty old woman who’s seeing things.”

“Tintin, if this were anywhere else,” Haddock says, pausing to recollect his words. “You would be insisting we go over tonight, no delays.”

“Well, it’s not anywhere else, and you’ve never cared about making me face my past before,” I say. “I’m not going. You can go if you’d like, but I won’t be joining you.”

Haddock stands up and slams his fists on the tabletop. “Tintin!” he yells. I jump, startled. In my periphery I see Nestor start to walk in, then take a couple steps back.

“Yes?” I ask Haddock. My voice sounds too small, too quiet.

Captain seems to bring himself under control again. His voice is calm, but with the promise of anger under the surface. “Tintin, I care now because I never heard anything about your past before.”

“Yes, and what’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“I never knew you were scared of your past,” Haddock says.

I laugh, sounding too shrill. “I’m not scared of my past,” I say. “This is ridiculous.”

“No, you’re right, you aren’t scared—you’re terrified,” Haddock says. “Trust me, I spent the last few years of my life running from my past. Drowning it out in drinking, sailing far and wide, but I could never escape it. You have to face it, Tintin. You have to face your past, no matter how much it hurts, no matter how much it scares you.”

“I’m not scared,” I insist.

“Prove it,” Captain says. “Come with me to Hale tomorrow.”

My friend isn’t backing down. He can be as stubborn as a mule, even or especially when drunk. I meet his eyes. “You know what?” I say, knowing even as I speak that I will come to regret this, “I will. I’ll go with you to Hale, and then you’ll know that I’m not afraid to face up to my past.”

“Good, lad,” Haddock says. He swigs more of his whiskey. Nestor finally emerges from the hallway and sets two salads on the table beside our salmon, then hurries back to the kitchen, maybe pretending that he wasn’t listening. Haddock and I are silent for a few moments, eating and drinking. I’m almost too anxious to eat, but I know that if I don’t Captain will just say I really am afraid.

“How’re the Gypsies,” I say rather than ask. I have to talk about something, anything to clear the air of those names. *Hale. Pepall.* Words I’d hoped never to hear again, except maybe in a letter.

“Oh, those layabouts!” Haddock says. His merry air returns. “They’re in tip-top shape, seems like. Can’t go a single day without hearing their fluting from over the hill. Merry lot, they are.”

I laugh, but it sounds uneasy. “Yes, they are awfully cheerful.”

“Maarah keeps asking about you, really wants that chicken,” Haddock says. He raises an eyebrow at me. “I think she might want something else too, lad.”

I look down, feeling blood rush to my ears. “Oh, stop that,” I say.

“Not that way, but I think she likes you,” Haddock says. “Pretty lass, that one.”

“You seem to have a knack for bringing up subjects that I don’t want to talk about,” I say, rubbing my knees. I grin at my friend across the table, and he breaks down into laughter. I finally allow myself to relax. The rest of the meal is calm, filled with our usual banter. Finally, at around eleven, Haddock slurs that we have to go to bed. “W-we’ll get up early to go to H-Hale,” Captain says. “Unless you’d rather…unless you’d rather…” he trails off, then laughs and hiccups. “I forgot.”

“We’ll go to Hale,” I say. Dread fills me, filtering into my stomach. I force a small smile onto my face. I stand up to walk my friend to his room. Haddock leans on me, still slurring incoherent bits of sentences.

We walk into Haddock’s room. It’s cluttered, old photographs are tacked on the blue-painted walls, books and clothes are scattered about the floor. I almost trip on a mate-less shoe. “Get some sleep, you old drunk,” I tell Captain fondly. I help him sit down on his rumpled bed.

“Only thirty,” he mumbles, then lies back in his bed. Within a couple moments, he’s snoring soundly. I feel a rush of affection as I look at him. For all his flaws, he’s the best friend I ever had. I trust him with my life.

If you did, you’d have told him sooner, a part of my brain scolds. I hush that down. I’m too exhausted to think about it anymore. If I do, I’ll worry myself sick. That’s the only thing left to do, at this point. No getting out of it, no changing my mind, just have to ‘face up to my past,’ as Haddock put it. I’d already said I would do it, I’m not the kind to renege.

I walk out of the bedroom, my steps heavy, and walk upstairs. Nestor calls, “Goodnight, Mr. Tintin,” and I’m too weary to do anything but wave at him.

It takes hours to get to sleep. Thinking about what will happen tomorrow, what Haddock may think…because it’s impossible for the truth not to come out at some point tomorrow, of course she’ll recognize me, and then Haddock will know. Everyone will know.

Chapter End Notes

So, yes, I know that Tintin technically takes place in Belgium, and that Marlinspike is ALSO located in Belgium...but due to my lack of knowledge of anything about Belgium, I've decided to go with the English translation, which has Marlinspike located in the fictional town of Marlinshire, in the UK. Hale is a real, small town, historically home to more wealthy families. And about the work, the chapters will begin to get

longer soon, and encompass more events rather than just select conversations. Hope you liked this chapter!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Why’re you dressed like…that?” Jacques’ son, Ben, asked. He and Cal waited for me at the end of my drive.

“Mother and Father said I must,” I huffed, adjusting my skirt. While Father was on a business trip, I’d been able to bargain my way into wearing trousers, but not anymore since he came home. I wore a navy blue dress with a pleated skirt, and stockings with leather shoes. I was already starting to sweat.

“Bad enough we only get to see you a couple hours a day,” Ben muttered. He scuffed the toe of his shoe into the dust of the road. “Now this? What are you supposed to do in a dress? We can’t have any fun with this.”

“Leave her alone, it isn’t her fault,” Cal said. He squinted down at the dirt between my feet. I was ten. I imagined my insides melting, slipping down through my body.

“Well, I’m just saying,” Ben said. He rubbed his chin. At twelve, the beginnings of fuzz were starting to appear on his cheeks, and he took every opportunity to highlight the fact. I was jealous. In a few years, I knew my monthlies would start, and then I’d start having to wear a brassiere. Needless to say, I’d rather grow a beard.

“I think I’m supposed to just sit and giggle,” I offered. “At least, that’s what my mother does, and the maids’ daughters.”

Cal cracked a grin. Ben sighed. “Soon, you’ll settle down and start having babies. That’s what my sister did.”

“I will not!” I insisted, tucking my shoulder-length red hair behind my ears. Though Mother wanted me to grow my hair out so she could plait it, I flatly refused to allow it past my shoulders. If I had my way, it’d be cut just above my ears all the time, like Cal and Ben’s. But for now, I have to settle for causing unfortunate accidents, like ‘accidentally’ leaning too close to a candle flame and burning one of my long red locks, and matting unwashable sap into the ends of my hair.

“Will too,” he said. “I remember, she used to be fun. Then she started wearing dresses, and then she got married.”

Even I knew that his time frame was off by a couple of years. But I understood the sentiment. “Well, I won’t do that to you,” I said. “I’ll keep having adventures with you. I don’t ever want to just settle down and cook, and raise kids.”

“You’d have a time finding a man to marry, anyways,” Cal said with a laugh. I forgot the lady-like manners my father insisted on and shoved him, sending him toppling into the

ground.

"To marry, I don't care," I said. I turned and started running down the road, kicking up dust with my little leather shoes. "I'd rather find a man to love."

"Hey! That's even harder!" Ben crowed, jogging after me.

Cal caught up to me to run side-by-side. "Men don't love women like you!" he shouted, grinning. "It just isn't done."

I didn't mind, I knew they meant it in fun. We ran round the corner of the street outside my house, passing servants, dogs, children. It was a slow summery Saturday afternoon, nobody around to tell Mother and Father that their daughter was running about outside with the servants' boys. The breeze our pumping limbs made rustled the leaves of the peach trees on the roadside. I easily outpaced Ben, who gave up easily. Cal kept up, occasionally tossing me a smile. Running fast enough, I felt a rising, rushing feeling in my chest, like my lungs were about to burst. I could almost forget the skirt swishing against my ankles.

I wake the next morning with Snowy snoozing by my side. Outside, the sun is just beginning to rise. I hop out of bed, pull on my clothes, grab my satchel and coat. At this point, as it's unavoidable, I've developed a feeling of strong, grim determination in the pit of my belly. I want to get this over with as soon as possible, and whatever happens may happen. If I have to be on my own again, that's alright. I've done it for years. I'll just make more friends if I have to, or I'll stay away entirely. It might be easier that way, with just Snowy for company.

Snowy licks at my heels and whines to go out. "Soon, boy," I tell him. We leave the room in the hush of early morning light.

I stop by Haddock's door on my way downstairs. "Haddock?" I ask, knocking on the door.

"G'way," I hear, slurring under the door. I easily turn the doorknob and walk into the room. I put my hands on my hips and scowl at the view of Haddock tangled in his bedcovers, half-in and –out of wakefulness.

"Captain, get dressed," I say, walking to the shuttered window. I pull the blinds aside, letting the dawn light stream into the room. Haddock jerks partially awake, then slides the covers up over his head.

"Rogue, scoundrel, have you any mercy?" he curses half-heartedly, mumbling more than enunciating. Snowy leaps onto the bed and begins to lick our friend's face. I laugh, despite my anxiety, at the sight of Haddock swiping tiredly at Snowy as the little dog nimbly avoids his large hands.

"Do you not want to go?" I ask, half-hoping. I'm not scared, this is merely self-preservation. Or at least, that's what I tell myself.

“No, no,” Haddock says, shattering my hopes. He heaves himself out of bed. I’m surprised to see that sometime during the night he managed to drunkenly wrestle his shirt off, his bare torso was covered by the bedsheets. Captain walks over to his closet, and I briefly envy his ability to just walk around shirtless, totally comfortable. Then I realize it must look odd and I look away. Snowy bounds to my side and licks my hand. I don’t understand how a dog could possibly be so understanding of a person’s problems, but he manages it.

When Haddock has forced himself into decent albeit rumpled clothes, we walk downstairs together. I learned long ago not to worry about hangovers, it seems that Captain is in a perpetual state of being hungover, so it barely bothers him anymore. Outside, our shoes crunch the gravel of the drive. Snowy runs off, yapping, into the misty morning. Haddock sits down in the passenger seat of the little yellow car, rubbing his temples.

“That blasted dog of yours is going to kill me,” Haddock says.

“Your drinking habit is going to kill you,” I offer smartly, sitting down in the driver’s seat.

“Pffaugh,” Haddock says. He waves me off. “I’ll be fine in a half hour, you wait and see.”

I tap my fingers against the steering wheel and gaze out into the hills and woods. If I strain my ears I can hear the Gypsies’ faint voices. “What was it the woman was saying? Men in her mirrors?”

“Now you show interest in the case?” Haddock asks. He chuckles a bit.

“I was always interested in the case,” I say, turning to face my friend. “I was just a bit worried about the location.” My heartbeat picks up a little, the way it does whenever I think about anything related to my past. But I keep my gaze steady.

Haddock raises an eyebrow, but only says, “Well enough, then. She says at first she thought it was only one man, but now she thinks it’s more. A group of men, living in her mirrors.”

I feel slightly relieved that at least the discussion of my life is getting put off a little longer. Maybe that’s what Haddock is thinking—I’ll find out eventually. “What do they do?” I ask. “These men, what do they do in the mirrors?”

“I asked her, she got a little nervous,” Haddock says. “Old woman must be losing her wits. But once I got her to quit jabbering nonsense, she said they mostly scurry about. Sometimes one will pause, watch her, or smile, or some such silliness.”

“Do they bother her?” I ask. In the distance, I see Snowy start back to the car, tail wagging. I start up the engine.

“She says they ‘unnerve’ her,” Haddock answers, pulling a face. I suppress a smile. Haddock’s always been bad with ‘blithering’ people, as he puts it. He wants people to be direct with him, without traipsing around their words. *Probably a lot of the reason he’s so constantly annoyed with me,* I think.

Snowy leaps into the seat beside me and my friend. I pull away from Marlinspike, a sense of finality settling into my stomach. *This is it,* I tell myself. No matter what happens, there's no stopping it, or going back. The next I see Marlinspike, something will have changed.

The drive to Hale is peaceful. The sun rises, burning away the mist, and it's a beautiful, warm day. Haddock falls asleep once we get to the highway, his head lolling back, mouth wide open. Snowy dozes at his side, his head in Haddock's lap. I give the Captain a soft smile, something I only indulge in when he's sleeping. I always feel nervous about showing the way I feel. Anger? Easily done. But not *good* emotions, like affection, love…

Love? Wait. Forget I said that. I shake my head and turn to focus on the road. I'm already nervous enough as it is without worrying about feelings. The wind ruffles my hair. *I wonder if she'll recognize me,* I think absently. It has been years, I've changed quite a bit. Perhaps there's a chance that she won't know me. I know I'm being too optimistic, but it keeps my heart from beating too quickly.

We continue driving, whipping through towns where boys call out to us from behind stone walls, and try to keep pace with the car as we barrel by. I always turn slightly to watch them stop, chests heaving, waving at us as they grow smaller in the mirrors. When we're passing through Bowdon, a boy runs up and grabs hold of the door, while his friends cheer him on from behind.

The Captain wakes up with a startled grunt, turning to glare at the boy. He immediately launches into a slew of epithets. "Banshees! Rapscallions!" The boy looks astonished, then releases the door and falls back. I have to keep from laughing as he returns to his friends.

Snowy wakes with a start as Haddock shifts his position in his seat. "How far away are we, lad?" Captain asks, yawning.

"Close, now," I answer. "Probably fifteen more minutes." The thought makes me want to cringe, but I keep a brave face. Nothing to be done now.

By the time we actually enter the town of Hale, I'm sweating from the heat. Haddock has removed his jacket and looks to be on the verge of removing his sweater. I wish I could do the same. We pass the old duck pond on the outside of town, and despite my earlier promises to myself, and the calm I thought I'd achieved, my heart plummets through my stomach. It's been so long. Everything has changed, but nothing has changed.

Haddock glances at me, but says nothing. We rumble through the town's gates, and Snowy pricks his fluffy ears, looking around him in interest. We pass more boys who trail after the car, and a few girls who glance up at us as we pass. Two women walking by completely ignore us. Even though it's unreasonable, I feel like everybody here is staring at me, like everyone here knows. I imagine that everyone who glances at our car is thinking, *Wait, isn't that…*

At last, we get beyond the main part of town, where there are fewer people. Haddock pulls a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket, squints at it, then says, "Pepall lives on Chester Avenue, beyond the main stretch, which—"

“I know where she lives,” I say, heart pounding. Haddock seems surprised, but doesn’t say anything. We continue down the road, passing the Watsons’ apple orchards. Their dog barks at us as we go by, and Snowy jumps up and barks right back. I almost laugh.

At last, we drive by a couple of little houses. Young boys working and playing outside stop and stare at us. Girls set down their dolls. I swallow down a pang of terror. “What are these?” Haddock asks, gesturing to the busy little houses.

“Servants’ quarters,” I answer, my voice barely perceptible over the engine’s rumble.

“Naturally,” Haddock grumbles more than says. We continue past the horse barns, and I look but don’t see anyone I recognize, not anymore. Finally, we arrive at the main house.

Haddock whistles as we pull into the drive. “I’m surprised you didn’t mention that Miss Pepall lives in a palace,” Captain says.

“Yes, well,” I say in reply. I’m too anxious to formulate an actual reply. I park the car, get out. Snowy bounds after me. I approach the door with the air of a man approaching the guillotine. That’s what it feels like, really. Haddock trails after, in awe of the architecture.

Standing on the front porch, I hesitate, staring at the door. Haddock asks, “Well, are you going to knock, lad?” He sounds irritated. I’m utterly paralyzed, gazing at the chipping green paint surrounding the brass knocker.

“I’ll do it,” Haddock says with an annoyed huff. He reaches out and slams the knocker three times. I jump each time.

“I don’t understand you, lad,” Haddock says. “You’ve never been this anxious about—”

The door opens, and for a second I forget how to breathe. I was terrified Pepall would answer the door, but it’s only a maid, one I don’t recognize. She looks from me to Haddock, who waves.

“Hello,” he says. “I’m Captain Archibald Haddock, Miss Pepall phoned me and told me to come over. This is the boy wonder himself, Tintin.” He gestures grandly to me.

“How do you do,” I say faintly, sticking out a hand to shake. I can’t feel my fingers, and the blood is pounding so hard in my ears I can barely hear. The maid looks at us distrustfully, then opens the door wider to let us in. She walks us through the entrance hall, with its pink marble floor and vaulted ceiling, then into a small, wood-floored sitting room. Haddock can’t stop looking around, at the taxidermied animal heads on the walls, at the little statues and oddities from around the world.

“Marlinspike is a filthy cupboard compared to this, laddie,” Captain says with a grin. “This place is incredible!”

“I’ll fetch Miss Pepall,” the maid says demurely, then drifts out of the room. I rub my hands together and sit down on the antique sofa, unsure if my legs will be able to hold me up much longer. Haddock sits down beside me.

“What are you so pale about, Tintin? Lighten up,” Captain says, jostling my shoulder.

“I’m not well, Captain,” I say, and try for a small smile. It’s not entirely untrue. A look of concern touches the Captain’s face.

“W-well, should we go? Are you going to be ill?” he asks.

“We should never have come,” I answer.

“Alright, alright, we can go,” Haddock says. He takes my arm and helps me to stand. Everything is rushing back to me, and it’s all too much. It was a horrible mistake thinking I could do this, of course I can’t do this, I can never go back—

“Hello?” a soft female voice asks. We both look up, halfway out of the room. A woman stands in the doorway to the sitting room. She’s slender and short, with a square face and wide hips. Country features. My eyes trace the familiar lines of her face—mouth set in a line, small nose, steady blue eyes. Her red hair is less vibrant now, streaked with gray, hanging down to her waist. I imagine how I must look to her, my face ashen, hanging onto the Captain to keep upright. She doesn’t even have the decency to look stunned or surprised to see me back here.

“Are you Miss Pepall?” Haddock asks. “Sorry, I know we promised, but Tintin isn’t feeling quite well. Perhaps another time?”

“Oh, I think your friend will agree that’s quite impossible,” the woman says. Her voice flows over me, bringing back years of memories.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Haddock asks. When the woman doesn’t answer, he turns to look at me. “Tintin? What’s this nonsense?”

The woman gazes down at me, something like pity in her eyes. “Well? Will you tell him, or shall I?” she asks.

At these words, I struggle to stand on my own. I won’t let her take this from me. She’s taken so much already. Haddock is saying something, but I can’t hear him. I lock my knees and force myself upright. “Captain Archibald Haddock,” I say, immediately shutting him up. I lock eyes with the woman, and don’t look away. “I’d like you to meet my mother, Rosie Pepall.”

Chapter End Notes

So I was browsing through Tintin Fanfiction and found that surprise! I'm not the first person to write a transgender Tintin fic. Also found that their fics were soooo good. So I advise you to check them out! (Can't remember the names but they're on the fandom page). Hope you liked this chapter!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I approached the girls with resignation, dismay, and distaste jumbled inside me. They sat in a corner of the sitting room, playing with paper dolls. Mother and Father allowed them to play inside the main house rather than the servants' quarters, so long as nothing was disturbed or broken. One by one, the four looked up at me—Joanne, Lucy, Elizabeth, and Samantha. They wore drab homemade dresses and cloth shoes. With the exception of Samantha, their hair was all in uneven plaits, clearly attempted replications of the women's hairstyles. Samantha's unruly curly hair flowed down her back.

Elizabeth stood immediately. She was the oldest of the girls, and I supposed that made her the leader. She stood a couple inches taller than me. "What do you want?" she asked. While the maids had learned that quiet subservience was easiest, Elizabeth had yet to realize this. She had a 'wild temper,' as Mother put it, and at this age she wasn't afraid to show it. But I wasn't scared of her. Ben had a far worse temper than Elizabeth, and I wasn't scared of him, either.

"I want to play," I said, unwavering. If I had to do this, I wasn't going to let some upstart girl frighten me away.

"We don't want to play with you," Elizabeth said, raising her chin in a gesture of defiance. Part of me admired her bravery, the other part just wanted to get this over with. Mother stood just around the corner, out of sight of the girls, but I knew she wouldn't interfere unless I picked a fight. For now, this was my battle.

I looked past Elizabeth at the other girls. Samantha looked uneasy, while Joanne and Lucy were interested in their leader's actions. This is ridiculous, *I thought, and stepped around Elizabeth. She moved forward to block me.*

I glowered up at her. If Elizabeth were a boy, I'd have knocked her down by now, and walked over to the others, who would laugh and let me play with them. Elizabeth would get over it after a couple of minutes and everything would be fine. But these were girls, and I knew that if I hurt Elizabeth in any way, I'd have to answer to my parents. I had to handle this differently, even though every instinct was screaming at me to punch Elizabeth in the mouth.

She looked a little anxious at my silence, probably because she knew my reputation for playing rough with the boys. I held my hands out, the way I would approach a dog. "Please, can I play?" I asked. I hated that I had to grovel to her, I hated how ridiculous this felt. But it seemed to work.

Elizabeth looked surprised. She turned to look at Joanne, Lucy, and Samantha, then back at me. "Alright," she said, nonchalant. "But we don't like to wrestle, okay? We're dressing up the paper dolls."

I felt a wave of relief wash over me. "I won't wrestle you," I promised. I followed her and sat down between Samantha and Joanne.

"Lady Lillian is marrying Prince Vincent," Elizabeth said, affecting a posh accent. Joanne and Lucy tittered, Samantha smiled, at a stern look from Elizabeth I put on a fake grin. It wasn't that I didn't like the girls, they just weren't my type of people. I wanted to be out running with Cal and Ben, I wanted to be leaping into the duck pond, the only water close to my home. And, frankly, the giggling was simply irritating.

"Do you want to play Prince Vincent?" Samantha asked me, smiling shyly. She darted Elizabeth a furtive glance to make sure this was approved. Elizabeth, queen, just waved in a noncommittal gesture.

"Whatever you'd like," she said. "Nobody ever wants to play the boys, anyway."

I took the paper doll from Samantha and gave her an encouraging smile. That's right, don't scare anybody off*, I told myself.* Play nice.

"*What*?" Haddock demands. I'm sure he wants to take a step back from me, but I think his concern that I might just keel over is too great. The panic attack is subsiding, though I knew that the worst is yet to come.

"You've always been very theatrical," the woman (it's too difficult to call her Mother) clucks. I'm still on-edge, waiting for her to spill the big secret.

"This is your mother?" Haddock asks, staring at her in disbelief. I nod. At any other time, I'd laugh to tears at the look on Haddock's face. His eyebrows have practically disappeared under his hair, if his mouth can open any wider it will hit the horsehair carpet.

"Have a seat," Miss Pepall says. "I can tell we've got a lot to discuss. And…Tintin looks about ready to faint."

I hate the hesitation before my name. If she calls me by my birth name, I swear to heavens above… Haddock and I sit down on the sofa, him still supporting my elbow. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asks. Now that the initial shock has worn off, I guess he's offended now. "You knew we were going to see your mother. You said your parents had died."

My mother makes a small sound in the back of her throat, something between offended and hurt. I do my best to ignore her. "I wanted to simply…put it off, if I could," I say, and try to muster a smile of some sort. "Besides, I thought I'd never see or hear from them again. For all intents and purposes, they had died."

Haddock just looks disappointed, if not angry at my refusal to trust him. I feel a pang of guilt in my chest. I didn't mean it like that, it's just that I couldn't tell him, I couldn't.

“Don’t be ridiculous, dear,” the woman says. Haddock and I look up at her. She stands with her hands folded at her waist, her mouth in a prim little line. “You really didn’t tell him about me?”

Anger rises to fill the emptiness that guilt left. “Did you make all this up?” I ask. I want to get to my feet to confront her, but my slowing heartbeat disagrees. “You saw my picture in the papers, invented some foolish story to draw me out here. Didn’t you?”

The woman just sighs. “Don’t flatter yourself. Yes, I called because I saw you in the papers. Can you blame me? It’s been ten years since I saw my child.” She says the last part quietly, almost to herself. Before I can say anything, she continues, “Aside from that, I really have been having troubles with the mirrors. And I figured this was as good a time as any, to kill two birds with one stone, you see.”

My mother, ever the efficient one in our family. I’m still not ready to let it go yet, I have to survive the rest of this case, if indeed there is one. “And what does Father think of this? Where is he?”

Her perfectly balanced, neutral expression falters. It tears down her guard, and she looks vulnerable, real, like the woman who bathed me all those years ago, who tended to my cuts and bruises. Then the mask is back. “You didn’t get my letter?” she asks.

“If I had, don’t you think I’d have sent you something back?” I ask. Haddock is silent for once, glancing back and forth between us with a troubled expression on his face.

“Your Father died two years ago,” she says with no hint of emotion. *Oh.* For a second, everything seems to ebb away, even the Captain’s hand on my elbow. My Father died. I didn’t even know, I didn’t go to his funeral. A part of me feels removed, I can hardly believe it. Then I focus back in. I can think it over later, but right now, there’s a case, and also my mother to deal with.

“Sorry to hear that,” I say, voice clipped.

The woman scowls. “For heavens’ sake, H-Tintin, as if you cared for a single moment about your father or me. You left us all alone, and didn’t visit even once.” Her voice is rising. At the almost-slip of my name, I nearly flinch. I want to tell the Captain to go outside so my mother and I can have a real proper argument, but I don’t know if I can let go of my one lifeline yet.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Miss Pepall gets her temper back under control. “I’m sorry, sir,” she tells Haddock. “But I’m afraid you’re going to have to wait outside in the foyer. I thought I could get through today without having a row with my child, but it appears I was mistaken. I really do apologize.”

“Um,” Haddock says, clearing his throat. “No, no ma’am, I understand. I’ll wait outside. Come and get me when you’re done.”

“We are *not* doing this right now,” I say in a hiss. “Haddock is my friend, you are not sending him outside like a chastised schoolboy!”

“I have not seen or heard from you in a decade,” the woman says. “Like it or not, I am still your mother, and you will do as I say. We *are* having this conversation now, before you swan off again doing heavens’ knows what.”

I glare at her. For a moment we’re in a silent stand-off, Haddock still hesitating by my side. My mother doesn’t waver, her clear blue eyes meet mine without anger, but a strong calm. Finally, I get to my feet. Haddock rises with me. “Captain, I apologize,” I say, voice firm. “But I guess you are going to have to wait outside until my mother and I work this out.”

He nods. “I understand, lad,” he says. He leans closer to me, so close I can feel the stubble of his beard tickle my ear, then he says in a quieter voice, “If you need me, just call, and I’ll come running.”

Good old Captain. Offended though he might be that I didn’t tell him the truth, he is still ready to be my bulwark. He walks out into the foyer, making a big show out of closing the swinging double doors behind him and strolling off, apparently without a care in the world. The doors are glass, he can clearly see us and we can clearly see him, but I think it’s the formality that is so important to the woman. Even she, growing up on a farm outside Hale, knew that it was improper manners to fight in front of strangers, which to her Haddock must seem.

“I’ve got the life I’ve always wanted,” I say in a quick whisper once Haddock is out of earshot. “I’ve got my own flat. I have my dream job. I am happy.”

“Listen to yourself, you sound like a spoiled child,” she says, unfazed. “Which, I suppose, is what made you this way. Perhaps if we had been a little sterner with you, you wouldn’t have run off when you did.”

“Perhaps if you’d been a little sterner with me, I’d still be at home, miserable,” I say. “Always wanting to see the world, and never able to, because it was ‘unfitting’ for me to do so. Well, I am unfitting. And I’ve seen so many places—done things you couldn’t believe! I nearly died in China. I met people from all over the globe, all in the past nine years. Do you really think I could have been happy back here?”

Mother takes a step back and puts a hand to her throat. “You nearly died?” she asks in a horrified whisper.

“I got shot by a photographer. But that’s irrelevant,” I say hurriedly, remembering that day. I had been unconscious for a little while, and when I came to Chang was sitting by my side on the grass, wiping at the blood on my shoulder. I was terrified at finding myself without a shirt, but Chang just met my eyes and nodded without saying anything. Then he bandaged up the cut from where the bullet had grazed me.

“Well, as nice as all that is, you could have at least posted us a letter.” My mother’s voice cuts over the thought. “I am your mother, and I didn’t even know if you were alive or dead. I tried to find you, but I didn’t know your address, I had no way of contacting you. And you weren’t even here for your father when he was dying. While he was wasting away, he forgot you left us. And every day he would sit in his bed and ask to see his daughter. Meanwhile, you were off—”

“I am *nobody’s* daughter,” I say without acknowledging the guilt that comes from thinking about my father. I’m still trying to keep quiet. Haddock is walking circles around the foyer, and when he gets close enough I’m sure he can hear me through the glass doors.

Miss Pepall and I regard each other for a moment, at an impasse. I have worked myself into an anger I rarely ever feel, and I think my mother must have done the same. I try breathing deeply to calm myself down. She just purses her lips and waits for me to speak. Finally, I say, “What do you want from me? Are you going to tell Haddock, in revenge for me leaving? Call up the reporters with a breaking news story about Tintin’s secret life?”

“Me? I’m not going to do anything,” she says, sniffing haughtily.

“I—wait. You aren’t?” I ask, taken aback.

“Absolutely not,” Miss Pepall says. She looks smugly satisfied now that I’m speechless. “Of course, you’re going to have to tell him. He’s your best friend, is he not? At least, that’s what the papers said about you two.”

“Right,” I say, cautious. I’ve fallen into this trap many a time—she lets you believe you’re winning, but there’s always a trick to it.

“If he is your best friend, the truth will come out eventually,” she says. “Especially if you’ve got a job in the way of yours. You’ll get stabbed, or blown up, or I don’t know what, and he’ll rush to your aid, and then what? Will you push him away so he doesn’t see the truth?”

“If I can, yes,” I say. A part of me knows I’m being unrealistic, but I’m slipping into the pattern I used to have with my mother, her being unequivocally firm in her position, me doing anything I can to deny her a single victory over me.

She hesitates. I guess she wasn’t expecting me to totally deny reason. Then she takes on a triumphant expression. *Crumbs*, I think, just before she asks, “What if your relationship deepens?”

I have to keep myself from allowing my mouth to fall open. When I do manage to speak again, I stammer, “W-What? I beg—how could you possibly—”

“He cares for you a great deal,” she says. *Oh, she’s enjoying this,* I think, irritated by the fact even though I’m still reeling from what she’s just said. “I’m not blind, you care for him, as well, though you might deny it. And if you ever want to be anything more than friends, the truth will come out sooner than you think.”

I swallow. No. There’s no way. “He is a man, and I am a man to him. He can’t love me.”

She shrugs. “As you like,” she says. “But either way, with somebody that close, he’s going to learn, whether it’s from you, Hannah, or me.”

I can’t prevent the shock pulsing through me. It’s been nine years since I heard somebody call me that. I’d almost forgotten what it sounds like coming from my mother’s mouth. For a moment, I can barely breathe. I whip around to look out the glass doors, praying and hoping

with all my might that Haddock hasn't heard anything. Thank heavens, he's across the foyer. I turn back to face my mother. Her face is almost pitying. She looks as though she didn't quite mean to say my name, but now she can't take it back or change it.

My shock falls away, giving way to rage and pain. "I am not 'Hannah' anymore, *Mother*," I say, voice steely.

My mother looks the way I felt when she called me Hannah. She collects herself quicker, though, and says, "To me, you always will be Hannah."

I turn to leave. I feel spent, exhausted, and it isn't even noon. I wonder how I ever survived a day in this household. "If you think I'm taking this case, you are sorely mistaken," I tell her, voice hoarse, as I walk out the doors. Mother (now that I've said it, I can't seem to stop thinking it) remains standing, alone in the sitting room. *You left us all alone,* her voice echoes in my head. I try to push it out.

I hate the emotions that are jumbled inside me—anger, fear, guilt, sadness, curiosity. A bothersome little part of me does want to know about men in the mirrors, but really, I just want to get as far away from this house as possible. I nod at the Captain as I pass, and walk to the door. Haddock follows me, silent.

We're halfway down the drive to the car when the door opens again. "You should visit your father!" my mother calls from behind us. Haddock hesitates, but I continue walking without turning around. "He's buried in the old cemetery. You ought to see him."

I don't do anything to acknowledge that I've heard any bit of her speech. I ask Haddock, "Can you drive?" I may have escaped with my life, but I don't want to risk it. I've been able to drive with mobsters after me, I've kept a cool head during car chases, but right now, anything beyond sitting and thinking is beyond me.

"Of course," Haddock says. He sits down in the driver's seat. I muster my voice into a whistle for Snowy, who comes racing round the corner of the house and leaps into the car. I close the door and we drive away from the house. Snowy, sensing my distress, whines and pushes his muzzle into the palm of my hand. I ruffle his tufted ears absentmindedly.

Captain clears his throat as we pull onto Chester Avenue. "So, I suppose now I know why you didn't tell me the truth," he says. I can barely nod.

"What did she want to talk about?" he asks.

"Nothing of consequence," I answer, gazing out at the trees as we whip past them. "Just lecture me for abandoning her, of course. Everybody leaves home, it isn't abandonment."

"Yes, but ten years ago? You were just fifteen!" Haddock says. "No wonder your mother was upset about that. Children don't leave home until they go to university."

"I had my reasons," I say. I rest my head on my hand. "And after I left, it just got easy to not talk to them, to let bygones be bygones."

Captain, thankfully, doesn't push it. He just continues driving. We speed through the main stretch of town, then, just as we're passing out of Hale, I say, "Captain, turn right here."

He looks surprised, raising his bushy eyebrows, but he complies. We continue driving down the road in silence, until we're not on asphalt, but dirt and gravel. Haddock occasionally gives me worried little glances. I think of what my mother said to me, about us becoming more than friends, and I feel my ears burn. It's a happy thought, surely, and one I've entertained before, but it isn't feasible. I know it could never work out.

I focus on the road, instead. Eventually, I say, "Turn left," and we arrive at the cemetery. I hop out of the car. Snowy follows behind, tail wagging.

Haddock asks, "Should I come along?" He sits half-in, half-out of the car, one leg dangling out the door.

"Sure," I say. I'm past the point of minding about this. Dead men tell no tales, as they say. There's nothing for Haddock to find out here but what he already knows. The Captain catches up to me with a quick jog. We wander through the tombstones, cut across paths, Haddock occasionally makes the sign of the cross if we go too near a grave. It's a silly little gesture, but somewhat endearing.

It takes a couple minutes of searching, but eventually we find it. I kneel in front of the tombstone. Snowy sits beside me. Even he has somehow gathered the gravity of this moment, he's totally silent, tail still on the ground behind him.

I trace a finger over the letters engraved in the stone. I guess a part of me was hoping that Mother was making it up, but she clearly wasn't. *Jonathan Pepall, God Rest His Soul,* is engraved in the granite. The ground is totally flat in front of the headstone. I wonder how long it took for the mound to vanish, pushed down by the rains and people walking by.

A breeze stirs the trees overhead. I feel like I should cry, but I can't bring myself to do it. It seems as though I never even met the man. Haddock rests a hand on my shoulder. "I was sorry to hear about your father, boy," he says. His voice is uncharacteristically quiet and tender, the way it was when he thought my parents had died, only now I dislike it less. "Were you two close?"

I remain kneeling for a second more, then stand up and walk away, in the direction of the car. Snowy hauls himself to his paws and trots after me. "Not at all," I say. "He barely knew me."

Chapter End Notes

Andddddd....with 20 minutes to spare! (If you live in the Eastern US, that is.) I'm so sorry this is late! I've been pretty busy all day. And whoooooooo this is a ton of dialogue. Also, title change because I honestly forgot the Michael Jackson song until I found myself humming it while writing this last chapter. Hope you enjoyed it!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Don’t you look lovely!” Mother said. She gestured for me to spin about. I didn’t twirl so much as plod in a circle. Still, Mary, the head maid whom Mother had conscripted to help dress me, clapped and smiled, her normally stern face creasing.

“I’m ridiculous,” I said. We were in Mother’s bedroom closet. She had decided it was time to try on some of the dresses she’d apparently been saving for me since she outgrew them. They were all frilly, overdone things, like the dresses I saw women wearing in the town.

“Nonsense, you’re beautiful,” Father said, appearing around the corner of the door without so much as a knock. I blushed. All the compliments served to make me more uncomfortable.

I walked to the bedroom window and looked down from the second story of the house. Cal was trimming the hedges with a pair of shears, probably a favor for Ben, who was nowhere in sight. Ever since he turned fourteen, he’d been running about with a different crowd, from the town. There was talk of letting go him and his father, who was now too old to work without pain. But I knew Mother owed Jacques too much to do that to him, at least not until she couldn’t hold Father off anymore.

Outside, it was damp and cool, the kind of day where Cal and I could have gone to the duck pond and fished until the sun came up to burn away the mist, or until the rain washed everything away. Weeds were starting to spring up around the edges of the fence, I knew that Jacques, Ben’s father, would have to pluck them later if nobody took pity on him and did it for him.

Father walked up to the window behind me and followed my gaze down onto the grounds. “Is that Callum out there?” he asked. I nodded without looking away from the window. Father gazed down at Cal, then turned to Mary. “Fetch the boy,” he told her. She nodded and hurried from the room.

I spun to face my father, alarmed. “What do you want with him?” I asked.

“We’re going to teach you how to dance,” Father said, giving Mother a smile. She stood up immediately, practically glowing at the chance to relive her girlhood. Or at least, that’s what I imagined she was so thrilled about.

“Oh—no, Father, I can dance with you, I don’t want him to see me like this,” I said, already turning red. I looked at myself in the mirror and wondered desperately how I could make myself seem less silly.

“No, I think you’re getting to the age where you ought to dance with young men,” Father said. “Callum’s seen you in dresses before, hasn’t he?”

“Well, yes, but nothing like…this!” I said, gesturing to the ruffles and frills adorning the bodice and skirt. If I’d known this was coming, I’d have enjoyed the simpler dresses while I could.

“You look lovely, dear,” Mother assured me. I ran a hand through my curly hair, thanking heavens for the fact that I’d objected to having Mary do my hair to complete the image. Oh, what did the hair matter, anyway? Cal would still see me like this, his face would go red the way it did the first time he saw me in a dress, then he would try to stammer a joke. Or, worse, he’d say, You look beautiful, just so my parents could hear what they wanted.

Finally, Cal walked into the room, the maid escorting him. My friend did just what I expected —he looked me up and down, flushed red, then stammered, “You look nice.”

I wanted to walk (or lurch, in these ridiculous shoes) across the room and sock him in the jaw, or tackle him and wrestle him on the shining wood floors of our house, till he saw me as he used to—just the same as he and Ben. But of course, I couldn’t do anything like that. I looked down at the polished shoes that I was teetering about on, and I told the wood floor, “Thanks, Cal.”

We gazed at the ground a moment longer, then Father said, “Here, you two—I taught Hannah’s mother to dance years ago, and now it’s time the both of you learned.” He took Mother’s hand, and she smiled and looked down. What’s the word—coquettish. That’s the only way to describe how my mother was suddenly behaving. Cal and I watched as they glided about the room in a simple box step for a few moments, then my father turned to Mary and said, “Put a record on—something with a waltz on it.”

She nodded and hurried from the room. Father took me by the hand and led me across the room. “Hands on her waist, Callum,” he instructed my friend, who promptly turned deep crimson. He did as my father said, and I put my hands on Cal’s shoulders. His shoulders were broader than I had thought, muscled by work with the horses and keeping up with Ben’s jobs, and his shirt was slightly damp with sweat. We both looked all around the room, doing our best not to meet the other’s eyes.

“Hannah, you step back, dear,” Mother said, positively beaming. It occurred to me that my parents probably thought they were encouraging some sort of romance between Cal and I. My ears burned at the thought. She continued, “Cal, you step forward. You step in a circle, see? That’s your basic box step, you know.”

I knew, I’d seen it done at plenty of debutante balls. Cal was fumbling and awkward in his steps, and occasionally he forgot which one was which. After a minute of bumbling around in a box step, our eyes firmly on our feet, the music started up. I was surprised to hear it was far more upbeat than anything at those dances. I met Cal’s eyes for a brief moment to grin at him, then I stepped up my pace. Cal stumbled along with me. Mother laughed and clapped her hands in time to the music. Even Father cracked a small smile beneath his heavy mustache.

When the song ended, I stood on tiptoe to spin my friend in a circle. He obliged, with a resigned grin. Mother’s smile faltered slightly. “You’ve got to let him spin you, Hannah,” she said.

“Oh, sorry, Miss Pepall,” Cal said. He quickly spun me in a circle, and I twisted on those silly high shoes and fell on my back. Father frowned, Mother winced. I pushed myself up, feeling ridiculous.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I said. Cal extended a hand to help me to my feet.

“Sorry, Hannah,” he muttered. His face was red again under his bright blonde hair.

“I thought you taught her to walk in high-heeled shoes,” Father said disapprovingly to Mother.

“I did, but she doesn’t like to wear them.”

“They hurt my feet,” I chipped in. Father glared at me.

“Well, now you must wear them Saturday and Sunday,” he said. My jaw dropped.

“Father!”

“It isn’t ladylike to be wobbling about all the time. You have to learn,” he said. The record player abruptly switched off.

“Is it ladylike to go about with blisters?” I returned. Father sucked in a deep breath.

“Don’t argue with me, young lady,” he snapped. I felt a sinking in my chest. Look what you’ve done, Hannah, we were having a perfectly good time… Father continued, “You will practice wearing high-heeled shoes, two days out of the week at least, until you get used to them. Is that clear?”

I bowed my head and said, “Yes, sir.”

Father nodded, seemingly satisfied with my answer. He looked to Cal, frozen by my side. “You can go,” he told him.

Cal looked to me, apparently torn between leaving me to my parents and following my father’s orders. In the end, he chose the latter. “Yes, sir,” he said, and shooting me an apologetic glance, he hurried from the room.

“Sometimes, I don’t know what gets into you,” Father said with a sigh. “You are a beautiful girl, but you behave like a boy, even now.” He shook his head and walked away, leaving me with my mother, who sat down in the lounge chair, white-faced.

Anger boiled up in me. How could he do that to me? No matter what I did, he would never be pleased with me. I started after him, ready to yell at him, to argue that he was being unfair, but Mother just gave me a dangerous look and quietly said, “Hannah, don’t.”

I swallowed my rage. “Yes, ma’am,” I said obediently. I walked out the other door. Really, though, none of it would’ve happened if I hadn’t had to try on the dresses. I’d only ever wanted my father’s old suits, anyway.

I stay at Marlinspike for nearly a week after I get back from Hale. Haddock goes out, I stay in and answered telephone calls with a listless, “Tintin speaking, this is Marlinspike Hall.” There are a couple more people wanting detective services, but I just tell them I’m not taking on any cases at the moment.

I tell Haddock I’m just ‘shaken up’ by everything that happened in Hale, but I get the feeling it’s more than that. I don’t want to go out, I don’t want to do much of anything. I’m having trouble sleeping. Even walking Marlinspike grounds, or going to visit the Gypsies, seems like too much of an effort. I’ve always loathed sitting still, so naturally Haddock is concerned immediately.

“You don’t want to visit the market?” he asks me on Monday, the day after we return. I’m lying in bed, my back turned to the door. Snowy is curled at my side, keeping me warm.

“Nope,” I say. I drag up the sheets to my neck. Snowy shifts, whines. I find myself wondering how long he’s been here, and whether he needs a walk. The fact that I don’t know either of those things is alarming to me, but in a vague, far-off way.

“You love the market! All the sights, the people, the smells,” Haddock says. “You bloody blather on about them for days afterwards.”

“I don’t want to go, Captain,” I say.

“Ten thousand thundering typhoons, boy,” Captain says, but it lacks force. I imagine him running a hand through his dark hair in exasperation. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m fine,” I answer. “Would you take Snowy out, please? He must need a walk.”

Muttering under his breath, Haddock turns to leave. He calls Snowy, who just shifts and stares at my friend. I nudge my dog. “Go on, boy,” I tell him, and he hops down from the bed and trots after Haddock.

Nestor delivers my supper to my room that night. It’s not like Captain to dote on people, in his opinion everyone should simply get up and go on with life, but he seems to be making an exception for me, and told Nestor to do the same. Though the food is delicious as always, I can’t bring myself to do much besides push the chicken round the plate, and finally feed it to Snowy.

The next night, Haddock comes to visit my room. He doesn’t turn on any light, in the dimness he sits on the edge of the bed, down by my feet. I’m surprised, but make no move to show it. The covers are tight up over my shoulders, I had to remove my canvas shirt the day before because it had begun to hurt to breathe, but I know Captain can’t see anything from his vantage point. Even in my haze, I’m hyperaware of his body heat, separated from my leg by a few inches of cotton bedspread.

He clears his throat, shifts his weight on the bed. “Are you sure you’re alright, lad?” he asks, his voice gruff. He stares fixedly at the plain cream wallpaper.

“Just fine, thank you,” I say, but my voice is faint.

“You know we’re friends. I mean, I understand why you didn’t mention your mother, but you should know you can tell me anything, anything at all that’s bothering you.”

I raise my head to look at my friend. He still won’t look away from the wall, but the tips of his ears, which I can just see between the bristle of his hair and his cap, are glowing red. On any other day, I’d probably be amused that Haddock’s so flustered, but I can’t even find a smile.

“I know,” I say.

“What is it—what did your mother say that’s bothered you?” Haddock asks. “I’ll knock the old nanny goat about, if that’s what you want.”

I finally do muster up a weak grin at the thought of fierce Haddock taking on my prim mother. “Captain, I’m just fine,” I say. “I just don’t think I’m up to much of anything at the moment.”

“Alright,” he says. He rubs his hands across the bedsheets. I think he’s about to leave, but he coughs and continues, “You know, I first got drunk at thirteen.”

I don’t say anything. He doesn’t seem to want a reply of any kind. “My father gave me a glass of whiskey—he’d been having plenty himself, of course. I’d never touched a drop in my life, so of course I couldn’t see straight after just two of those little glasses.”

I find myself wondering where he could possibly be going with this. Haddock chuckles and says, “My mother was so angry! But my father kept trying to kiss her and slurring that it’s okay.”

“Captain—”

“I didn’t drink again until I left home, at eighteen, to go to sea,” Captain continues as if he hasn’t heard me. “My first night on-board this ship, all the men were drinking, and somebody poured out a glass for me. And I got properly drunk, for the first time, and woke up the next day swearing I’d never drink again. But of course I did, because when I was drunk, it filled up something in me I didn’t realize I needed. All these years, what had been missing was the whiskey, ever since my first taste.”

This is surprisingly profound for the Captain. He must be in a rare mood to speak like this. Of course, I’m in a rare mood to lie about doing nothing, so there’s that as well. I listen attentively, still curious as to how it relates to my current predicament.

“I always wonder what kind of a man I’d be if I didn’t have the drink, if I’d never tried it,” Haddock says. “If I’d fill the hole with something else, or if I’d ever even notice it was there. Tintin, my point is, sometimes you don’t know you need something. And sometimes, that

‘something’ makes you into a better or a worse man. But you will always need it, no matter what it does to you when you take it. The dreading is worse than swallowing your medicine.”

I finally speak. My voice sounds raspy from disuse. “Are you saying I need my mother? That I’m incomplete without her?”

Haddock turns, and I see him grimace and press his lips together so they disappear behind his bushy mustache and beard. “No, I don’t mean that—well, I…” he trails off, seeming at a loss. Then he stands up quickly, brushing himself off as if he’s trying to sweep his words away. “Oh, I don’t know what I’m saying. These are just the ramblings of a drunken old seadog, Tintin. Take them as you will.” With that, he hurries out of the room, shutting the door behind him. I feel a pang of guilt for making him worry. I don’t even know how to explain it to myself, I just can’t bring myself to move half the time.

The next day, I try to force myself out of bed. I walk Snowy quickly around the grounds, much to his delight. I hear the Gypsies over the hill, but I go by them as fast as possible. I’m just not up to talking with them. I wonder if Haddock was right, that Maarah likes me. I’m flattered at the thought, but I know I could never return the feeling. *See, you don’t even make a good man*, I think, and the thought prompts me to cut the walk short and hurry to shut myself in my bedroom until supper. I make it downstairs, force a few bites down my throat as Haddock grins at me, then escape back to my room as quickly as possible.

The day after that, I follow the same routine. And then Friday happens, and all hell breaks loose. I’m woken at dawn by Haddock thundering, *“Tintin!”* outside of my room. I jerk awake, but before I can do anything, my friend barges through the doors. I draw the covers to my neck out of reflex, but Haddock yanks them away. Luckily, I’m wearing two undershirts, including the canvas one.

“Get out of bed,” he snaps. Also luckily, or perhaps unluckily, he seems to be in too much of a fervor to notice anything about my chest.

“Haddock, wha—what do you—” I can barely stammer coherent sentences. My brain is fuzzy with sleep and the lack of focus that’s plagued me over the last few days. I can’t even imagine what’s going on.

Haddock grabs me by my shoulders and unceremoniously drags me out of bed, red pants and all. I automatically wrap my arms around my chest, but Captain could care less. Snowy, awakened by the racket, hops up and begins barking, snapping at Haddock’s ankles. “Listen, you,” he yells, straight into my face. I resist the urge to wipe his saliva off my cheek. “I’ve had about all I can take of your blithering, moaning, wallowing self-pity! I understand, you’ve had a falling-out with your mother, but blast it all, lad, it’s been a bloody week! A week you’ve gone lying in bed, leaving me and Nestor to walk Snowy around!”

“I am not wallowing—”

“Don’t you talk over me!” he bellows, and I shrink into myself, subdued. The veins in his neck are bulging, and his face is the color of ripe cherries beneath his spittle-flecked beard. “Whatever happened to the man of action, eh? Where’s the famous boy detective? Blistering barnacles, that lad was my friend, what’ve you done with him!”

He pauses, apparently so wrought with anger that he can't continue. Snowy continues to bark, like he's trying to tell Haddock to let me go at once, before he bites the man. Haddock barely notices.

Finally, Captain finds the words and continues, in a barely lower pitch, "You won't tell me what's wrong with you, and don't try to deny that there is something the matter, because a blind baboon could see it. Ever since we've got back from Hale, you've been acting like a madman, lying in bed, rocking back and forth. Well, while you've been lying about pitying yourself, and refusing to let anybody help *you*, people have been dying."

I blink, startled. Haddock nods vigorously, infuriated. "I got a call from Miss Pepall—your mother—this morning, saying one of the maids had died. Now, I know you—"

"Who was it?" I ask, voice faint.

Haddock's words grind to a halt. "What?"

"Did she tell you the name of the maid who had died?"

"Oh—for heavens'—well, I believe it was Elizabeth. A woman named Elizabeth Abbot. She was stabbed."

My mouth fell open slightly. In a flash, Elizabeth came back to me—those blonde plaits over her shoulder and the contemptuous look on her face the first time I met her, later in our friendship flashing me a quick grin, walking about the house in a simple maid's frock, serving hors d'oeuvres the last time I saw her… "I knew her," I say, quietly. "She was a friend."

The Captain is drawn up short by that. His rage seems to subside. In a much more kind voice, he says, "Oh. I'm sorry, Tintin. I didn't know." He looks down at his hands on my shoulders and releases me, as if he's surprised by their presence on my body.

I sink down on the edge of the bed, thinking, it's far too early for this. After a few days of lying in bed without events, it's all too much at once, my head is spinning. Haddock sits down beside me, deflated. I hug my arms to my chest. Snowy jumps onto the bed and sniffs at me, alert and anxious.

"Tintin, it's time you got out the house," Haddock says. "I know you don't get along with your mother, but after seeing you this week, I can't think of anything else to do but go back to Hale. You've worried me all week, you won't take on any other cases. And there is a real case happening, women don't turn up stabbed out of the blue. Frankly, you need to do *something*."

"Haddock, I can't go back," I say.

"Why not?"

"I'm scared," I say truthfully.

My friend looks at me and sighs. He claps a hand on my back. I flinch, waiting for him to ask why I'm wearing a canvas shirt, but he doesn't say anything about it. "I'll be right there with you," he says. *That won't help,* I think, despairing, but he continues, "Sometimes, even if you are scared, you have to face it. Or it'll beat you down, til you can't live with it."

I let it beat me down all this week, I realize, a little surprised. My brain starts to clear, and embarrassment floods in. How could I have sit around for a whole week, and not given a thought to anyone but myself. I'd rather leap into a Yeti's cave than go back to Hale, but Haddock's right, I can't let my fear beat me down any longer. I'll have to face my mother, I'll have to face my past. I stand up. Snowy barks again, but this time it's happy, excited. "Captain, you'll have to excuse me, I need to get dressed," I say. "We'll leave in half an hour."

Chapter End Notes

I AM SO SO SORRY THIS IS LATE ;_; I just moved cross-country, so not only have I been crazy busy, but my sleep schedule is whacked because of the time change (I'm now behind three hours yayyyy). Also, for the next two weeks I'm gonna be overseas, and I have no clue what the internet situation will be like. I'll try to get the chapters up in drafts so AO3 will autopost them on the right days, but I've no clue if it'll work and if it doesn't I'll just have to take a mini-hiatus and I'm sorry about that as well. Additionally. Tintin's state and Haddock yelling at him is NOT meant to be a statement on mental illness! I am aware that you don't just 'get over' depression with a stern talking-to, nor do you overcome anxiety through doing the thing that makes you anxious. Tintin just needed someone to give him a good talk-up and (not-so-kindly) wake him up and get him moving again. I think some of Tintin's condition sounds like depression but I didn't mean it to be that way, it's just Tintin being generally unhappy and in a bad spot in his life. I don't know if that makes any sense??? Sorry if not, I'm doing a bad job of explaining this. Hope you enjoyed it anyway!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I woke to Elizabeth shaking me awake. I struggled upright, stammering with a tongue thick from sleep. "What—what's happening?"

"Hannah, you've got to come," Elizabeth said. There was something in her green eyes, her cheeks were flushed, and her blonde hair was down from its plaits, rippling over her shoulders.

"What do you mean? Has something happened?" I swung my legs over the edge of my bed, a heightening sense of alarm making me more alert.

"Get dressed," she said. "Everything's fine, but we've got to hurry, I met your da on the way up here. He wanted to know what I was doing in here so late," she paused, a nervous little giggle pushed out of her lips. "I told him you needed help with arithmetic. Hurry up!"

"I—what is going on?" I demanded, even as I stood up and walked to my wardrobe. I pulled out a simple skirt and a blouse.

"Nothing," Elizabeth said. Her eyes sparkled. I was still bewildered, but I turned away from her to quickly undress, pulling my nightdress up and over my head. I heard her say, "You wear a brassiere to bed? It must be so uncomfortable."

I just shrugged, feeling my face flush. "I like it better," I said. In truth, I just didn't want to see what was happening under my clothes. Mother called it 'becoming a woman,' I called it 'the worst thing to ever happen to me.' Increasingly, it seemed everything was conspiring against me. It wasn't just Father's restrictions (the number of which grew with each day), my own body didn't want me doing what I wanted to do.

Elizabeth said, "You've always been a bit odd," but there was amusement in her voice. It took a couple months to completely smooth out her mistrust of me, but we were fast friends within a year. True, I still preferred to be running about with Cal, but to my great surprise I'd found that girls weren't as bad as I'd thought. Samantha was quiet and sweet, Joanne was high-strung but had a wicked sense of humor, and Lucy knew everything about everyone, whether you told her things or not. Elizabeth just kept everyone in check, she had a way of making you listen to her.

When I was dressed, we tiptoed down the staircase and out the front door. Elizabeth took my hand and pulled me into a run. "Let's go, Lucy and Joanne are already there," she said. There was something suppressed in her voice, something almost like laughter that she was fighting to keep down.

"Where are we going? Why are we running?"

“Don’t ask questions!” she told me in a hushed voice, breaking into giggles. “If your da notices we’re gone, we’ll be in a tight spot.”

I thought of how she called him ‘da,’ not ‘father,’ the way I did. She called her father ‘da,’ too, and her mother ‘mum.’ I’d noticed it before, of course, and every time I felt a twinge of envy in my belly. If I called my father ‘da,’ he’d stare at me, grumble how it wasn’t a proper name, and rub his mustache. If I called Mother ‘mum,’ she’d probably be so surprised she’d have to sit down.

We hurried through the dark streets. On a hot Sunday night, not many people were out, we hid our faces and kept to the other side of the street when we saw someone coming out way. We didn’t yet have streetlights, like in London and the other big cities. I remembered Father’s reprimands to never go outside in the dark without a man. I’d always resented that. Why shouldn’t I run free in the night, like Ben, like Cal? Still, even with those thoughts to bolster my confidence, I felt a bit anxious, not just because of the way Elizabeth was acting.

Finally, we turned off the road, down the path to the duck pond. I was confused. Were we swimming? Or fishing? At this hour? As we got closer, I was able to see someone had set a small fire, hidden by the leafy trees by the road. I could hear muted voices—giggling, a boy saying something, someone else hushing them as we approached. Elizabeth strode right into the little gathering, still gripping me by the hand. “I brought Hannah,” she announced with a flourish of her hand. A few hands waved, barely visible in the dim orange light.

I gradually began to make out faces—Joanne and Lucy first, then Ben, and a few of the boys he hung around with. Elizabeth pointed them out to me. “Drake, James, Thomas. They’re older boys. From town.”

I suddenly felt self-conscious. Okay, so we were going to sit round the fire, tell ghost stories or something equally silly. But I knew none of these boys but Ben, and these days I might as well not know him either. “Hi,” I mumbled, shy. As a child, I would have sat down right next to them, talked to them as though I’d known them my whole life. But though I was comfortable around Cal, growing up had made me wary of strange men, even if the men in question were teenagers.

“Bout time you got back,” the boy named James said. I could barely see his eyes, glinting with a bright light. “They wouldn’t let us go in til you two got here.”

Go in? *I wondered. James stood up and shucked off his shirt in a smooth, easy gesture, leaving his chest bare. Blood rushed to my cheeks, I quickly looked away. I gave Elizabeth a pleading look, and she finally gave in. Grinning, she said, “We’re going swimming!”*

“Shh,” Joanne told her, toeing her shoes off.

“You should have told me to wear my bathing suit,” I said to Elizabeth. The boys laughed. I felt like I was missing something vital, something about the way the air hung over us

“Silly, it’s no fun if you’re in your suit,” Lucy said. She stood up and pushed her skirt to her ankles. One of the boys whooped, she didn’t seem to notice and began to unbutton her shirt. James waded out into the pond, whistling a song under his breath.

I felt panic rising in my throat. "I can't do this," I told Elizabeth.

Elizabeth didn't answer. She tossed her hair over her shoulders and tugged off her shirt, exposing a plain white brassiere. I looked behind her and saw Drake watching her. Even in the darkness I could see a kind of hunger in his eyes, something that frightened me. "He's looking at you," I said, fighting to keep the anxiety out of my voice.

"Hannah, that's the point," she said, sounding a little irritated. "Come on, I told them it would be fun if I brought you. Don't get scared now." She pushed her skirt down to her ankles and stood in her underclothes.

My heart pounded. I couldn't do this, I didn't want to be looked at the way Drake was looking at Elizabeth. My train of thought was interrupted by Ben leaping into the pond, splashing me and Elizabeth, who giggled and ran to the water. "Come on, Hannah!" she called, and was immediately hushed by Joanne, who followed her into the pond.

Ben resurfaced and spat water at the bank. "Hannah, love, get in the water," he said with a wide, wild grin.

I looked down at the fire, hissing by my feet. "I'll stay up here and watch the fire," I said. "Look out for people coming."

"That's Thomas' job," Drake said as he jumped into the pond, imitating Ben.

I turned to look at Thomas, almost angry he'd taken my excuse to get out of this. He shrugged and said, sounding apologetic, "Never learned to swim."

I sighed and looked back at the pond. "Isn't it cold?" I asked, hopeful.

"It's the middle of July," Elizabeth said, sounding exasperated.

"You told us she'd be fun," Drake said. Joanne smacked his shoulder.

"Come on, Hannah," Ben called. I glared at him, he gave me a cocky smile right back. "You can't tell me you're afraid."

"I'm not afraid," I insisted, but I was having a hard time keeping from shaking. I wished desperately that Samantha was there, she wouldn't want to do this, either. She'd make me feel better about hesitating.

"Course you aren't. You're never afraid of anything, are you?" he asked. He sounded so smug, so righteous and amused. I made my decision.

I stripped to my underclothes quickly, not the way the other girls had, taking their time, showing off. I rushed to pull my clothes off, then ran into the water, ignoring James' whistle. Surrounded by inky darkness, nobody could see me, it wasn't as bad. The warm water wrapped me like another layer of clothing, a better layer of clothing. I took a deep breath, floating easily.

“See, that wasn’t too scary,” Elizabeth said. I nodded, but for the life of me I couldn’t imagine how I’d get out of the water with the boys watching.

We splashed around for an hour or so, Thomas keeping a lookout by the fire. I caught on to what the girls were doing, it wasn’t as though they were being very subtle. They giggled at everything the boys did, brushing against them in the water. For my part, I did my best to keep my distance from everyone.

I remember floating in the water, looking up at the stars, then coming back down to earth abruptly when Ben yelled, “Kiss her, you imbecile!” For a terrified, heart-stopping moment, I thought he meant me, but then James lurched forward and crashed his mouth onto Elizabeth’s.

I watched, frozen by shock. Eventually, curiosity replaced the surprise. I’d never seen anything like what they were doing. This was nothing like the chaste kisses my parents exchanged in the morning at breakfast. Whatever Elizabeth and James were doing looked like a battle, pushing back and forth, his hands clenched round the straps of her brassiere. I didn’t even know you could use your tongue to kiss. There was something animalistic about it, something wild and primal. Instinctual.

“You like to watch, don’t you?” Drake asked. I jumped. I’d been so busy watching James and Elizabeth, I hadn’t noticed him swimming closer to me. He treaded water right next to me, and I backed away from him, putting a more comfortable distance between us. He spat into the water and pushed his wet hair back into long dark streaks down his neck. “Sure you don’t want to do more besides watch?”

I shook my head quickly and looked away. That hunger was back in his dark eyes, burning above his high cheekbones. “It feels nice, you know,” he said, voice low and growling. Drake sounded like the Watsons’ dog, menacing and terrifying, only he was right next to me. He had the ability to back up his bark. “I could make you feel nice, if you want.”

I shook my head again as he moved closer to me. My heart was beating too fast again. I wanted nothing more than to run out of the water, grab my clothes, and make for home. The feeling of reassurance had dissipated, now it felt as though the water was trapping me. Drake moved closer to me, inching into my space. Every bit of my body was screaming at me to take off running, but I couldn’t bring myself to move a muscle.

“Hey, mate,” Ben said. He was suddenly on my other side, sliding an arm around my shoulders. I jumped. “You aren’t bothering my girl, are you?” His tone was different from Drake’s, Ben’s voice was more friendly. I kept my eyes fixed on the water in front of my face.

“I’d never,” Drake said, finally backing away. “Just joking around. Right, Hannah?”

“Uh huh,” I mumbled, and hated myself for it.

“Glad to hear that’s all,” Ben said, waiting by my side until Drake swam back to the group. Then he dropped his arm from my shoulders, turned to me and said, “You alright?”

“Fine,” I muttered.

“Good,” Ben said. He seemed embarrassed, but I couldn’t quite place why. “He’s a good bloke, Drake, but sometimes he takes things a bit too far. Tell me if he gives you any trouble, alright?”

I nodded. Ben turned as though he was going to paddle back to the others, but then he looked at me again, and stayed by my side, half-floating. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked, looking up at the night sky. His presence didn’t feel threatening, the way Drake’s had. I felt secure, my heartbeat and breathing were returning to normal.

“Yes,” I said. Then we were silent, only moving to keep ourselves afloat, silent. We stayed like that a while, I don’t know how long, but the fire was little more than a few glowing coals when we finally got out of the water. We dressed without toweling off, shivering in wet clothes. I walked back to my house with the girls and Ben, Drake, Thomas, and James all headed back towards their homes in the main part of town. Before we parted ways, James planted a long kiss on Elizabeth’s lips.

“Are you two going together, now?” Joanne asked Elizabeth once we passed out of earshot. Awe colored her voice. We began the walk back to my house; their mothers, as maids, lived on the property.

“Maybe,” Elizabeth said, overly nonchalant. She had a small, self-satisfied grin on her face.

Lucy sighed longingly. “I wish I’d been kissed,” she said. “You’ve all been kissed, haven’t you?”

“Not me,” I mumbled, and felt self-conscious admitting the fact in front of Ben.

“I kissed Matthew Long,” Joanne said with a little giggle. Matthew Long was a shy boy, small and bookish, with glasses that always seemed to be falling off his nose. “At a party.”

“Did he faint?” Ben asked, joking.

Joanne slapped his shoulder in a gentle reprimand. “And I suppose you had your first kiss with the Queen?”

“Actually, with Alice Monroe,” he answered, grinning at her.

Lucy sighed again, only this time it was more pointed. “Looks like we’re the only ones, Hannah,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. Ben shot me a look I couldn’t quite decipher, but I ignored it. I mentally turned over what I’d learned that night. I’d never even considered it before, frankly. It didn’t look like a particularly big deal, a small gesture. But what I’d seen tonight had changed my perspective. I felt that kissing was much more than pressing lips together, it was on the verge of something bigger. Kissing was like a promise of something more.

We arrive at Hale a little after noon. I find myself wondering, *If I take this case, is this always the time we'll arrive?* We drive past all the familiar sights again, but this time my heartbeat is normal, I'm determined not to be afraid again, and this time I really mean it. I'm done being ruled by my fear. We pull into the main house's drive, and it's far more crowded this time. There are police cars and people buzzing around the grounds, maids and servants in uniform, and the occasional anxious bystander. I try to scan for familiar faces in the crowd. I wonder when Mother decided that everyone had to be uniformed. Maybe it was Father's idea.

"Anyone you know?" Haddock asks me.

I dig my hands into my pockets. Snowy stands by my side as always, raising his nose to sniff the unfamiliar air. I say, "It's been years. Nobody I can recognize."

We walk through the crowd, an officer tries to stop us as we walk up the steps to the front door. "Get Miss Pepall," I tell him. "She called us."

The officer stares at us, trying to decide what to make of me, Haddock, and Snowy. A slight young man, an older man wearing mariners' clothes and a grouchy expression at being turned away, and a small white dog. Then the officer squints. "Wait, you're what's-his-face—the boy reporter! You're Tintin!"

I nod, giving him a wide grin that I only have to force a little bit. *No need to be afraid, you can do this.* "That's me," I say, ignoring the people starting to turn around to look at us.

The officer steps aside. "She said you'd be coming," he says, and actually tips his hat. "We found the maid upstairs. Miss Pepall's up there now, she'll be wanting to see you."

I swallow down an overly anxious laugh and walk into the house. Do you know how when you're a bit worried, and the only thing you can do is laugh? It doesn't happen often to me, but this is one of those times. Haddock and Snowy trail me into the house. Inside, there are even more police officers, striding round the house and taking notes on identical little pads. They glance at me, but probably figure that the police outside wouldn't have let me in were I not an exception to the rules. I'm almost amused at the sheer number of the officers. Hale is a small, sleepy town, Elizabeth's murder must be the biggest thing to happen in the past decade.

Elizabeth's murder. It really is strange to think of it that way. I feel more invested in her death than my own father's, and that might be even stranger. Then again, I am investigating it, so that could be a significant reason.

We climb the stairs, including Snowy, and find the crime scene immediately. There are bloodstains on the hardwood floor, the deep, dark streaks soaked into the floor and stretching beyond the group of policemen standing in a tightly closed circle a couple meters from the staircase. *That simply doesn't make sense,* I think. *Blood would never pool that far, that's too much.*

We step over the blood—Elizabeth's blood, it occurs to me—and push into the circle of police officers. Somewhere close by, a woman is crying. My mother is nowhere in sight. One of the officers turns to me, looking cross, mouth open to reprimand me. Then he stops, says,

“You’re Tintin, aren’t you?” I nod, he says, “Pepall told us you’d be by. Pleasure to meet you, truly. I’ve heard great things about you.”

I smile. “It’s good to meet you too, sir. Would you mind telling me exactly what happened?”

He flips open his notepad. “Well, another maid found Miss Abbot lying in a pool of her own blood, round three in the morning. Screamed her bloody head off, of course, brought Pepall running in seconds. No weapons in sight, and Abbot’s got several stab wounds to the chest and neck. Six, to be precise. Whoever did this wasn’t kidding around, and that’s no mistake.”

Haddock whistles under his breath. “Ten thousand thundering typhoons,” he says.

“I see,” I say. I picture Elizabeth, the girl I grew up with, lying right where I’m standing, her eyes blank and unseeing. With a grimace, I push the thought from my mind. “Have you spoken to the maid, the one who found Abbot?”

“She’s in the next room, talking to a couple of officers,” the policeman says. “We aren’t getting much out of her, though. She’s little more than a blithering idiot. Won’t stop crying and wringing her hands.”

I frown at him. “And I suppose you’d be totally calm after finding one of your friends and colleagues lying in a pool of her own blood,” I say sternly. I hear Haddock stifle a laugh behind me.

The officer is immediately flustered. “Er, yes, well,” he says. “You’re welcome to go in, if you’d like.”

“Thank you,” I say, and walk past him, down the hall.

Haddock catches up to me, drops his voice to a low mumble, and says, “Are you sure you’re going to be alright? I mean, you said that woman was your friend, right?”

“She was, but I hadn’t seen her in years,” I say, voice clipped and precise. “I’ve faced cases far more dangerous than this. I’ll survive.”

Haddock nods and lets it drop, but his wordless sigh sounds an awful lot like ‘If you say so.’ I ignore it. I’m facing up to my fears, just as he said I should. He should have no complaints for me. I will make it through this case.

We walk into my parents’ old bedroom, and find two officers speaking with a thin, tearful woman. She has her face in her hands, all I can see is a mass of curly brown hair falling over her shoulders. She’s still in her nightgown, trembling and sobbing.

My mother sits on the bed, looking faint, but her mouth is drawn in its usual firm line. If I know her, she’s locked all her emotions away into a drawer that she’ll open later, whenever she needs them. I learned from the best, after all, though I’m working at moving away from being my mother’s child.

She stands when she sees me. “Hello, Tintin,” she says smoothly. “So glad you could make it. And Captain Haddock, pleasure to see you again.”

“Oh, spare me your pleasantries,” Haddock says shortly, and when my mother looks briefly surprised, I swear I have never liked the man more. He continues, “We need to talk to the girl.”

In my periphery, I see the maid lift her head from her hands. I turn, a reassuring, sympathetic smile already in place on my face, and freeze, staring at the woman as she stares at me. *Oh, great snakes.* I’m in for it now. Before I can do anything, she says, “It’s you. You came back.”

Then she faints dead away. The officers leap to their feet and begin fanning her face. I run over to where she’s lying on her chair. Snowy jumps up onto her lap and begins lapping at her cheeks. She comes to within a couple moments, and her big brown eyes open wide. I snap my fingers until she’s focused on them, then she looks up at my face.

“Hello, Samantha,” I say, giving her a small, hopeful smile. “You remember me, then? I’m Tintin, and this is Captain Haddock.” I gesture to my friend, who gives her a wide grin, all teeth. Snowy stops licking her face and begins wagging his tail frantically. “Oh, and this is Snowy.”

Samantha blinks a couple of times. “Tintin? You’re not Tintin, you’re…” My heart plummets, just before she trails off. She looks around at the officers, at my mother, hovering behind me. Her eyes pause on Haddock. Then she looks back at me, at the sudden look of alarm on my face. “Right,” she murmurs. “Of course you’re Tintin. Hello, it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

I refrain from heaving a relieved sigh. “It has, it has,” I say. “Do you want to talk with the police here? Or do you want to talk alone?”

She glances to all the men in the room. “Alone, please,” she says quietly.

The two officers exchange a glance, then look at my mother. She looks between me and Samantha, then nods. One of the officers sighs, then says, “As you command, your highness.” The other policeman elbows him in the side and glares at him, then they walk from the room with my mother.

Samantha looks around me at Haddock. “I’m not talking with him here, either,” she insists.

Haddock throws his hands into the air, exasperated. “For heavens’ sake, girl, I won’t bite you!”

“What I have to say can be said to Tintin and nobody else,” she says, her voice small but firm.

“Well, I’m not leaving him,” Haddock says, glaring at her.

“No, you ought to go,” I tell Haddock quietly. Typically, I have a ‘whatever you want to talk about can be said in front of him as well’ attitude, but under the circumstances it might be best if Samantha and I were alone.

Haddock looks a bit taken aback, but he doesn't argue. He jams his hands into his pockets and says in a gruff voice, "Alright, lad, if you say so." He walks out the door, then pauses, and gestures to where Snowy sits at her feet. "Can Snowy stay in here? Or will he make you too nervous?"

I fight down a laugh, though Samantha looks a bit surprised by the Captain's sarcasm. "You can leave the dog," Samantha says, voice faint.

With one last glare at Samantha, Haddock storms out of the room. I think, *Poor Captain, every time we've come here he's been kicked out of the room so I can have a private conversation.* But I don't have much time to think about that, because barely after the bedroom door swings shut Samantha's up on her feet. "Hannah! Hannah, what in God's name are you doing?"

Her voice is a high-pitched whisper, I quickly and frantically hush her. "Tintin! My name is Tintin now!"

"Tintin? What the bloody hell does that mean?" Samantha asks in a slightly quieter whisper.

I almost smile, despite the gravity of the situation. Samantha never swore when we were growing up, but if she were scared or stressed enough, she could be brought to utter the occasional 'bloody hell.' Some things never change. But she's staring at me with anger burning in her eyes, she looks terrified and confused and furious all at once, and now is not the time for past reminiscences. I say, "It means absolutely nothing, but it's my name. Please don't call me Hannah."

"Do they know? I mean, certainly your mother, but does the man with the beard know?" she asks, voice dropping even lower.

"No, he doesn't, and I'd much prefer he stays that way," I say. "Samantha, let's talk about something else. What happened with Elizabeth? In your words."

Samantha seems to remember the real reason we're here. She takes a step back, and all the emotion drains from her face, leaving her looking tired and old. With one hand, she pushes her dark hair back, combing her fingers through the tangled locks. "I woke up—it happens a lot these days, I woke up in the middle of the night and I thought, My throat is dry as a bone." At the word 'bone,' Snowy pricks his ears up, but Samantha continues. "So I got out of bed, walked downstairs to get a glass of water from the sink."

"You're sleeping in the house now?" I ask, surprised. When I was living here, that was something my parents would never have allowed to happen.

Samantha nods. "Your mother—well, it's just talk, but word is she's lonely. Wants young people in the house, because her girl died." She darts an anxious look up at me, then continues too quickly, "So she always lets at least one maid in the house. Last night, it was me and Elizabeth."

I open my mouth to say that I didn't die, I'm right here. But in essence, Samantha is right. Hannah, the girl I was, is dead. She's certainly never coming back. I clear my throat instead.

“Alright, so you woke up and went to get a glass of water. Then?”

Samantha’s eyes begin to well up at the memory. I think of what the officer said, about her crying and wringing her hands. So far, she’s done relatively well, but it looks like this might break her. She takes a shuddering, deep breath, and says, “I walked down the hall. And I saw something white, with dark…splotches.” She breaks down in a racking sob, her whole body shaking. “I thought it was some laundry, at first, something one of the maids forgot and left on the floor. So I got closer, ready to pick it up, and…Hannah, there was so much blood!”

I cringe at the use of my birth name, but decide to forgive it, under the circumstances. I reach into my coat pocket, pull out a handkerchief, and hand it to Samantha. She rubs her red eyes, blows her nose. “Sorry,” she says, sniffling. “Tintin, sorry.”

“It’s alright,” I tell her. “Can you tell me the rest of it?”

“Well, I screamed, and Miss Pepall came out,” Samantha says. She tries to steady her voice. “Miss Pepall called the police. And I’ve been here since they arrived. Tintin, they think I did it! I know they do, but I really—I *really* didn’t do it, I could never have—” She breaks down in another bout of crying.

I walk to her side and help her sit down on the couch. “Shh, shh, Samantha, it’s going to be fine,” I tell her. “They’ll know you didn’t do it.”

She chokes down her tears and stares at me, the hand on her arm. She says, “Tintin, who are you?”

I frown at the sudden change of topic, but I get the feeling her head isn’t working too clearly at this point. I say, “I’m the same person you’ve always known.”

“You’re a man,” she says.

I take a deep breath. I’ve never been good with this sort of thing—I’ve never had to be, considering I ran away from everyone who knew my secret. I say, “I am. I’m not Hannah any longer, but I played dolls with you when we were younger, I plaited your hair. Badly, if I recall right.” I try for a smile, she returns with a weak grin.

“You know, you had the right idea,” Samantha says, rubbing her eyes. “Getting out of here. The rest of us just got trapped, but you, you’ve made something of yourself.”

There’s nothing I can say to that. I clear my throat and stand up. “I’m going to talk to the officers now. They won’t arrest you.”

“Alright,” she says. She looks so exhausted. I hope they let her sleep soon.

I walk from the room, Snowy trotting at my heels. Haddock seems to be in an argument with one of the policemen, but they stop talking when I open the door. My mother is down the hall, talking with the other policemen. The officer who called my mother ‘Your highness’ says, “Well?”

I shake my head. “She didn’t kill her. Trust me, I grew up with Elizabeth and Samantha, Samantha could never do such a thing. They were best friends.”

The officer looks impatient. “Well, all the doors and windows were locked,” he says. “The murderer must have been inside the house at the time.”

“Maybe it was Miss Pepall,” Haddock suggests, voice dark.

I turn to my friend, shocked. “Captain!”

“I’m just saying, there was nobody else in the house, you say that girl didn’t do it, and Miss Abbot certainly didn’t stab herself six times,” he says. “We have to think logically.”

I frown. If this were any other case, any other people, would I be so quick to throw out Haddock’s idea? *But it doesn’t make* sense*,* I think. *Why would my mother kill Elizabeth?* Before I can say anything, though, one of the officers speaks up. “We spoke with her already. She was out of the house at the time of the murder, visiting with a neighbor.”

“In the middle of the bloody night?” Haddock asks, skeptical.

The officers exchange glances, then look down the hall at my mother. “Well, ah,” one of them says, “We have a statement from one Mr. Wilson that places her there. A recent widower. And he seemed very vehement in his insistence that she could not possibly have been anywhere else but his home.”

“What does that have to do—oh,” Haddock says. He blushes slightly, presumably out of embarrassment at not having realized it sooner. For my part, I’m trying not to focus on what I just heard.

“Very well, then,” I say. “I’m going out to inspect under the windows, outside. Perhaps someone’s gotten in that way, before everything was locked.”

I quickly walk away from the officers, down the hallway. Haddock jogs to catch up. “Sorry, lad,” he says with a grimace. “But does this mean you’re officially taking the case?”

“I won’t be able to sleep at night if I don’t,” I answer, walking down the stairs. “I thought this was just something my mother made up, but there definitely is something peculiar going on here. I owe it to Elizabeth to find who did this.” *And besides,* I think rather than say to my friend, *perhaps you’re right. Maybe this will be good for me.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the mini-hiatus guys! As I thought I didn't have wifi overseas. But now I'm back and it should be smooth sailing til the end of the fic (which I'm proud to say I actually have planned out now). Hope you enjoyed it!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> I'm not sure if I have to warn about this, but I felt I should--there's quite a bit of gender dysphoria in the first italicized bit, as well as a brief (very, very brief) suicidal thought. It isn't too bad in my opinion but if it isn't your thing then you might want to skip the italics down to the regular text. Hope you enjoy the chapter!

I was thirteen, there was a spot of red on my panties. I screamed, and my mother came running up the stairs. When she saw me sitting on the floor of the bathroom, holding the offending bit of cloth in my hands, she said, with apparent delight, "Congratulations! You're a woman now, Hannah."

I shook my head. She looked exasperated. "You knew this would happen, why'd you scream?"

I shrugged and avoided her eyes. Mother was right, I'd been taught exactly what to expect. Elizabeth had gotten hers three months before me, Samantha had gotten hers a year ago. I knew what was coming. I'd screamed because I didn't want this to be happening, because I would give anything to go back to the time when my chest was still flat, when I didn't have to worry about bleeding through my skirts, when I could play with the boys without being expected to strip to my underclothes.

But that time was past. Mother showed me what to do when the blood came, how to hide it. She told me there was medicine to take for the headaches and stomach pains. I listened in sullen, angry silence. I thought I'd hated my body all I could, but never had I loathed it more than that day.

The pain started the morning after, like a slow punch to the gut that lasted from sunrise to sunset. I didn't go out at all, only left bed to use the toilet. Mother brought me meals and said sympathetic things about how it would get better soon, about how I would get used to it. I could tell from her voice that she was fairly bursting with glee.

"It'll be alright, Hannah," Mother said. My little girl has finally stopped being a boy! *"I can find you some pills to take, you know."* I've coached her through those difficult patches, and soon she'll start bringing home grandchildren!

Maybe it was just the stomach pain, but I nearly vomited at the thought. Choking on my words, I rolled away from her and asked her to please leave the food on my nightstand. She did and hurried away. I imagined her skipping through the house, taking the food from the maids, quietly whispering that It's Hannah's alone time.

I hated it all. Nobody and nothing had prepared me for this. The quietly-read 'feminine books' hadn't mentioned that I would loathe my body, despise what it was doing to me when this happened. They only said that this was an important chapter in every woman's life, it should be treated with reverence and respect. In the books, there were illustrations of happy girls, pleased at their body's betrayal. I sat up, looked at my reflection in the mirror. I looked greasy, tired, sullen.

Was it an unwritten, unspoken rule that you pretended to love bleeding every month? Elizabeth and Samantha seemed so happy when they got theirs. Samantha quietly said that she'd become a woman, with a shy, secretive smile, and we all asked her how it had happened, how she felt. Elizabeth had stood up and announced that she'd gotten hers with great flourish, and the same questions abounded. They'd both looked so exuberant. They said nothing about the pain, about hating themselves, about wanting whatever caused this gone forever.

The worst was yet to come. Shortly after Mother brought me dinner, which I left untouched, Father came in and sat down at the end of my bed, as close to me as he could be without actually being close to me. He cleared his throat, rubbed his moustache. My stomach was sending out bolts of pain. I closed my eyes.

Father said, "So, your mother tells me you're a woman now."

In that instant, I wanted to die. I really, truly did. It was an unusual feeling, one that I hadn't felt before, but I immediately understood the severity of it, I immediately knew exactly what it was. It shocked me to the core, even past the pain. I kept quiet, I kept my eyes closed. I hoped he'd think I was asleep, and leave.

More silence. He shifted his weight on the bed. "I wanted you—your mother said—I'm—we're proud of you," he said.

Proud of me? For something I had no control over? Why can't you be proud of me for good marks, or for catching a fish bigger than Cal's? Why do you have to be proud of me for this useless, awful thing? *I pressed my mouth into the bedsheets and said nothing. Father sat for a full minute more, hoping for a response, probably, but I wasn't going to give him one. At last, he sighed, patted a region of the mattress that was nowhere near my body, stood up, and walked away.*

That night, I cried. I decided it was because of this, my hormones, from my limited grasp of biology they were probably rioting at the moment, because of this, this stupid terribly awful thing that doesn't make sense this doesn't make sense why does this have to happen to me this is all wrong why why why why……

The next day wasn't as bad, I was certainly calmer. I went to Samantha's house and we talked for a while, about girls we knew from town who had been seen kissing boys who worked at the house. We looked over Lucy's drawings from art class, of daffodils and a small sketch of her father. I picked up a charcoal drawing of a tulip with heavy shading, and I said, for no particular reason, "My monthlies just started."

There was a surprising amount of shrieking. I looked around at the faces of my friends, startled. They were all clamoring over each other to be heard, to be the first to congratulate me. Samantha asked, "How do you feel now?"

"Kind of in pain," I answered flatly. The smiles fell from their faces, they looked around at each other, a little bewildered. I thought of how Samantha and Elizabeth had announced their own monthlies, rosy-cheeked and grinning from ear-to-ear. They hadn't looked upset, they were thrilled. I tacked on a grin and belatedly added, "But also, more womanly, you know?"

The smiles were back. "That's exactly how I felt!" Elizabeth said, giggling. "Poor dear, it doesn't hurt so much, after a while."

"Right, right," I said, encouraged. "It was kind of surprising, but I'm so glad I got it."

"I'm so pleased for you," Joanne said, and smiled at me.

I smiled back, and my last hopes died. Inside, my words were scrambling up my throat, the words I thought last night. I swallowed them all back and ignored the pain in my stomach. There's no turning back, this is going to be the truth forever. I'm a woman now. There's no use fighting it.

And for the next two years, I actually believed it.

Inspecting under the windows turns up nothing—no footprints, nothing at all. There are no signs of a break-in. Haddock goes out to inspect the rest of the grounds, looking for signs of a struggle. When I ask my mother what she thinks happened, she says, "It's the men in the mirrors. They did this to her."

I stare at her. Honestly, I'd forgotten about the men in the mirrors. Sure, I've seen stranger things—exploding mushrooms on a meteor, adults acting like nursery school children, and Mother has so much conviction I halfway believe her. So I check the mirrors, which of course turns up nothing.

"They're there!" she says. "You can ask Samantha."

"I'm not questioning Samantha, the poor girl's had a terrible fright," I tell Mother. "She needs to sleep, not participate in a hunt for a murderer."

I walk back through every room in the house, checking all the mirrors. *Pursue every lead,* I tell my skeptical side. In the downstairs bathroom, there isn't a mirror, but I find a little oblong crystal next to the toilet. I pick it up, peering at it. Snowy sniffs at it. It shines in the bathroom light. I look around the floor for more, and can't find any.

"What is it?" my mother asks, standing in the bathroom door. I jump. I hadn't realized she'd followed me down.

“Glass shard,” I answer, swallowing down an annoyed comment. “But there aren’t any others. How peculiar…”

“This bathroom has never had a mirror in it,” Mother says. “There’s no sink. We only ever used this bathroom when company came over, and that was years and years ago.”

Her unspoken words—*before you left.* I ignore them and look around at the walls, painted a plain pink. I look back at the glass shard. “There’s no dust on this,” I murmur, half to myself.

“Having a little powwow?” Captain asks, appearing behind my mother. My mother shrieks a little, then puts a hand to her throat, looking embarrassed. I bite back a grin. Haddock continues, “Tintin, you’d better get upstairs. Luckily the officers have cleared out up there, but he won’t listen to me.”

I pocket the glass shard. I push past my mother, out of the bathroom, race up the stairs, and find Snowy licking the floor where Elizabeth’s body was lying. I hadn’t noticed him leave the bathroom downstairs. “Snowy!” I snap, horrified. I scoop him up from the floor, and he starts licking my face. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you rascal!” I try to push his face away, but stop. His breath smells salty. Something familiar…something I can almost taste. Something I ate a lot, growing up.

I turn to Haddock and my mother, who’d followed me up the stairs. “Have you had beets recently?” I ask.

My mother nods. “Just last night. How is that important?”

“Beet juice. I thought all that blood on the floor was odd,” I say. “It’s beet juice. Elizabeth was murdered somewhere else, her body was brought here, and the killer thought there wasn’t enough blood—so he brought his own.”

“There was some in a dish, in the kitchen,” Mother says in a horrified whisper. “Elizabeth wanted to clean it, but I told her to do it in the morning.”

I press my lips together. How’d the killer get in? And why was it so important that Elizabeth look as though she died on the second-floor hallway?

“It’s the men, the men in the mirrors,” Mother is saying in a frantic whisper.

Snowy squirms in my arms, I set him down on the floor. “You didn’t find any signs of struggle? No blood?” I ask Haddock.

He shakes his head, tugs on the brim of his cap. He’s just as confused as I am. Not a good sign. My brain is working furiously, with no results.

One of the few officers who remained in the house leans out of one of the bedroom doors. “Any ideas yet?” he asks.

I shake my head. Not even one.

Contrary to popular belief, I do own a suit. The style is outdated and it's dusty from misuse, I rarely wear it because the padded shoulders make me feel like a small child. The coattails almost brush the backs of my knees, and the accompanying black tie must be tucked into the front of my trousers so it doesn't hang out of the jacket. But I wear this suit to Elizabeth's funeral, and by the time we arrive at the church, I've sweated through my canvas undershirt, my regular undershirt, my button-up, and have started to sweat through my black wool jacket.

Haddock and I get out of the car. We opted to leave Snowy at home with Nestor. Haddock wears his usual clothes—they're formal enough for a funeral, and anyway I doubt anyone minds. Everyone is in black, rubbing red eyes. I'm not surprised at the amount of people who came out for her funeral. It is a small town, after all, and Elizabeth had a lot of friends.

I spot a few familiar faces and quickly look away. I've changed a lot in the past few years, hopefully nobody will recognize me without my trademark shoulder-length red hair. A part of me says I'm being too optimistic, but I'm just hoping against hope now. I see my old neighbors, the Watsons, and I turn around so fast my back wrenches. Haddock follows me, keeping a hand on my elbow, steadying me.

I'd told him he didn't need to come, he didn't know Elizabeth, after all, but he'd insisted. He said that after what had happened the first time we visited Hale, he didn't want me going alone in case I wound up curled on the floor in the same listless state as last time. I appreciated the sentiment but I hated the feeling of eyes on us, people murmuring, *What are they doing here? Who are they?*

Inside, it's cool, but even more packed. I keep turning away from people, until I find myself face-to-face with Lucy, Joanne, and Samantha. They're a tight-knit group in the midst of this throng. Lucy and Joanne look startled, they look me up and down. My throat tightens, waiting to hear what they're going to say. But Samantha must have told them about me, because Lucy just murmurs, "It's good to see you, Tintin."

I relax. Really, it's ridiculous that after everything I've been through, the only thing I'm terrified of is hearing my birth name. "Good to see you, too," I say. "Shame it had to be like this."

"Who'd have thought that anyone would want to kill poor Elizabeth?" Joanne asks tearfully. She breaks down into a sob, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes.

"She was so well-liked," Lucy says, blowing her nose. She rubs her belly, and I realize with a shock that she's pregnant, her belly swelling under her black smock. I'd been so busy worrying about what she was going to say, I didn't even notice.

"Terrible business," Samantha says quietly.

I feel a pang of grief, push it away. *Lock it up, think about it later,* I tell myself. Captain is just standing by, rocking back and forth on his feet. I say, "Oh—Lucy, Joanne, this is my friend, Captain Archibald Haddock."

He shakes their hands. They muster up small, watery smiles. Lucy turns back to me. “Miss Pepall told us she’d hired you,” she says. “Have you found anything yet?”

I shake my head. “I’m still working on it,” I say. Honestly, it’s driving me mad. I’ve been back every day since Elizabeth died, and I have no theories so far. I talked to Samantha, who agreed with my mother, there has never been a mirror downstairs. This week, I’ve left my room to eat and walk Snowy and nothing more. But the inexplicable glass shard is left at home, along with my furious puzzling over the case. The worst thing is why Elizabeth’s body had to be moved. It makes no sense at all.

My mother appears, the girls take one look at her and hurry off. “Surprised you’d want to come here,” Mother says, apparently not noticing their sudden departure. I know she means, *Since nearly everybody here has seen you in a dress, you know.*

Haddock looks like he wants to say something, but I talk over him. “Elizabeth was my friend,” I say steadily.

Mother says, “Tintin, it doesn’t seem like you’ve been much of a friend to anyone in this room.”

“He’s the best friend *I* could ever ask for,” Haddock growls. I feel a sudden rush of affection for him.

She looks at him with amusement. “*Only* your friend?” she asks, tone deceptively nonchalant.

Haddock turns purple. He splutters a few words, I catch ‘thundering’ and ‘barnacles’ and I almost laugh but for the subject matter and setting.

“Let’s not start this, Mother,” I tell her quickly. Haddock’s stammering quiets, he glares at my mother and says nothing more. She nods doesn’t walk away so much as glide away, the picture of womanly grace. I remember trying to copy her stride, and never being able to, especially in heeled shoes.

Haddock and I find seats in the pews and wait for the pastor to arrive. Around us, people I vaguely, almost recognize are sniffling. Luckily, and I feel guilty even using the word ‘lucky’ under these circumstances, everyone’s too wrapped up in their own grief to pay attention to me.

At last, the pastor walks in. My heart pauses, then picks up, too fast. *It can’t be…* But it is, it’s him, Jacques’ son Ben, the boy I grew up with, now changed into this sad man in black. He walks to the pulpit, the last few mourners take their seats. Even from my pew, halfway to the back of the church, I can see the dark circles underlining his eyes, the gauntness of his face.

He clears his throat and begins the service. I’m not paying attention to a word of it. His voice sounds deeper than I remember, but it’s still Ben’s. *Great snakes, it really is him.* He’s talking about how well-loved Elizabeth was, he’s talking about her heart and her grace. I think of her talking about kissing James, and wonder if Ben’s thinking about it too. I feel a sudden cold note of fear in my belly. What if he sees me? Did Samantha tell him I’m Tintin now? He’s going to recognize me, if anybody does it’s going to be him…

The service passes in a blur. As more people break down in tears, and more memories of Elizabeth are shared, I bite my tongue to keep from crying, because if I do, I'll only draw more notice to myself. I don't deserve to cry anyway, as my mother pointed out to me, I left her, I left everyone, but now isn't the time for self-pity. I focus on things that aren't Elizabeth's smile, the way she walked in a new dress, and the lump in my throat recedes.

Then we're rising for the funeral procession, and I'm grateful for Haddock's hand at my elbow. "Doing alright, lad?" he whispers as we walk out the door, following the coffin bearers. I nod. We gather around the freshly-dug grave, Ben starts to say the final prayers, and he suddenly stops speaking. There's a quiet murmur around the crowd, I look up, and his eyes are fixed on me.

Crumbs. People are staring at me, following the line of Ben's eyes, quiet whispering starts among them. I immediately look down, my heart pounding again. Honestly, after the week I've been having, it would be nice if my heart got used to the fear, and didn't jump up a notch every time I got scared.

Ben slowly resumes his prayers. Thank heavens, the congregation redirects their attention to the pastor. Elizabeth's casket is lowered into the grave, and a man who must be her husband tosses the first shovel-ful of soil on top of the box. Tears are running down his face, he wipes a hand across his nose and eyes, then he turns to help a young blond boy lift the shovel, throw the next bit of dirt into the pit. *Her son,* I realize, stunned.

I linger at Elizabeth's graveside. I look down at the half-full yawning hole, try to think of something to say, but can't imagine anything. Now that the urge to cry has passed, I feel spent. I murmur, "Wherever you are, I hope you're happy." Then I turn, and with Haddock by my side, walk away through the graves.

For a moment, I truly believe I've escaped it. I allow myself to relax. I loosen my tie slightly. I'll go home now, puzzle over the case, read about mass hallucinations. Haddock and I will eat pork for supper.

But of course, I don't even make it past the gates. A hand catches my shoulder, and I think, *This is it.* I turn and say, "Ben, I—" and only see Cal, his face weather-beaten and suntanned, hair bleached by days of working in the garden. It's been years, but he barely looks any different. For a moment, I allow myself to just take in his face, to remember all those days with him, to let memories and his sudden presence wash over me.

Then he says, "Hannah Pepall, you've come home at last."

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was too cold inside. The marble floor, a beautiful peach color that at any other time I admired, sucked all the heat out of my body through my shoes. For once in my life, I was glad of the ridiculous heeled shoes, elevating my soles from the icy ground. There was a fire on in the corner hearth, but I couldn't feel any bit of its warmth. People swirled around the room, dressed in their finest clothes, and made no mention of the Christmas weather.

Mother stood in the center of it all, ever the gracious host, Father on her arm. She was deep in conversation with a couple of men I didn't recognize, probably talking about how much it cost to renovate our old dining hall into a ballroom. I'd heard enough about it those past months, all about the flooring and the installation of the crystal chandelier, and the new wood to cover the old wood of the walls…really, I'd got it down to a science.

"Having fun?" Cal murmured. I was sitting on one of the leather chairs along the wall, watching guests sample the hors d'oeuvres *from platters held by the staff. Mother told the maids and servants that, beyond the usual servers and chefs, they didn't need to work unless they wanted to attend the ball. Almost everyone had showed up, to the point that Mother had a difficult time allotting jobs to all of them.*

I shrugged, watching balding Mr. Lillian twirl a cousin of mine around the floor. "It's fun," I said. "I'm no good at dancing, though."

"Not even after all my expert instruction?" Cal joked.

I smiled up at him. He stood beside me, holding his tray—covered in little porcelain dishes filled with a small bit of pudding—above his shoulder with one hand. It was odd seeing Cal in a black suit, blonde hair pushed back, the picture of formality. I said, "I believe it was my parents providing the expert instruction—you shoved me over!"

"Not the way I recall it," Cal said, amusement lighting his eyes. "I was the perfect dance partner."

"Want to give it a go?" I challenged him. He raised one white-blond eyebrow. I said, "Let's see how much you remember."

Cal gave me a wide grin. "Won't your parents mind?" he asked.

I shook my head and held out my hand for him to take. I said, "It's Christmas."

Cal chuckled softly, set down his platter on a nearby table, and lifted me to my feet. I nearly stumbled, but caught myself. I could balance in heeled shoes about a month after Father's new rule about them. I still hated how they chafed my feet, but telling my father would just

provoke another argument. I'd learned to be quiet, don't make a sound, fade into the background and look nice and hope he doesn't notice you.

We did our simple box-step round the dance floor for a song or two. I'd learned a couple more complicated dances, but I liked the box-step, and anyway Cal hadn't danced since that one last time. I imagined the guests were staring at us, murmuring about how improper it was for the heir of house to go about with a serving boy.

"This isn't your first dance of the night, right?" Cal asked.

"I danced with some old fellow a while ago," I answered. "Yours?"

"You're my first dance, Hannah Pepall. Lucy asked me to, but Ben whisked her off," Cal said.

I felt a brief pang of envy, and pushed it away, To Think About Later. "Are they together?"

Cal shrugged, his shoulders tensing beneath my hands. "No. I think he fancies someone else."

My heart leapt for a moment, and I forced myself not to get too invested in what that might mean. I said, "I see," and allowed myself to be twirled.

"You've gotten much better at that," Cal said, brown eyes mischievous.

"I've had lots of practice, you know," I said, stepping back to avoid Cal's toes. "I go into town all the time, dance with every man I meet."

"Is that so?" Cal asked, amused. "Beautiful girl like you shouldn't be going alone to places like that."

My smile faltered at that, I nearly stomped on Cal's foot. I plastered the grin back on. There had been a couple years in there where I spent more time with the girls than Cal, but now things were almost back to the way they were before. We joked, got along well, but occasionally something small would remind me that things weren't the same, wouldn't be again. I always forced those little sad moments from my mind, this was as good as it would get.

I was about to reply with another sarcastic comment, when my mother caught my shoulder from behind. "Cal, can I borrow her?" she sweetly asked my friend.

He nodded, taking a step back, and exaggeratedly bowing to me. I giggled—yes, that was something I found myself doing more and more lately—and allowed myself to be led away from the stableboy's son. My good mood faded when I saw that she was taking me to my father, and the look on his face was anything but pleased.

"Why are you dancing with Callum?" Father asked, voice low.

"Because you said two years ago that I'm to the age where I ought to dance with young men," I said, keeping my eyes down. "I danced with Cal then—why should it matter now?"

"It's been two years," Mother said, sensing an oncoming fight. Her placating tone indicated that she wanted to calm us both down, but it wasn't working, and her next words didn't help. "You're fourteen, Hannah. Now, it's a bit early, but your father and I have begun to look for a suitable match for you."

Horror filled my chest, bubbling up into my lungs. I couldn't speak. Father continued for Mother, "Callum was good as a childhood friend, and he may well always be one of your closest friends. But he cannot provide for you, or your children."

My heart pounded in my chest, dull, angry throbs. I wanted to say, You married Mother, she grew up on a farm! *But I knew the response already:* That's different, because it was *me* providing for your mother. Hannah, stop glowering, you look terrible with that awful expression on your face. *Father looked around the ballroom. "Ah—that's Mr. Bishop, over there," he said, pointing out a tall, skinny man with a thinning patch of slicked-down brown hair. He seemed awkward, gawky. Father said, "He's a nice fellow, the Bishops come from very good stock, you know. He's set to inherit his family's estate."*

I clenched my hands into fists. Then I turned on my heel and stormed out of the ballroom, out of the entrance hall, past several startled guests. I was vaguely aware of my parents calling to me, Cal's concerned voice. Then I was walking in snow, my ridiculous heels sinking into the fluffy white, and I couldn't even be bothered to care. I was so angry I couldn't feel the cold.

I walked around the house, all the way to the back terrace, where I was sure nobody could see me. I took several deep, shuddering breaths of the frigid night air, leaned against the cold brick wall. The chill finally seeped through the thin layers of my dress, into my back. It was even colder out there, but the thought of going back inside seemed intolerable.

"Hannah?" a low voice asked out of the darkness in front of me. I jumped and had to clamp my mouth shut on a tiny shriek. A face emerged into the moonlight—Ben. He looked sheepish, embarrassed. "Sorry, love, didn't mean to scare you there."

I just sighed. "I'm fine, I'm fine," I said. Of course, Ben was the last person I wanted to see me like this, but I couldn't bring myself to care that much about it.

Ben leaned against the wall beside me. For a moment, we just stared out across the snowy yard together, silent. Then he said, "What are you doing out here?"

I pressed my thumbs into the spaces between my nose and eyes. I said, "My father's having an affair." I'd been certain of it for a while, a couple months before, he started leaving the house at all hours of the day, and I'd seen an expensive necklace in his coat pocket that had never appeared in Mother's jewelry collection. It didn't take a detective to figure it out. "And now, he has the nerve to lecture me on who I can and cannot fancy. So I ran out here." I halfway laughed, but it sounded soggy in my throat. I was already regretting my abrupt flight from the ballroom—little more than childish theatrics.

Ben nodded, absorbing my words. I asked, "What are you doing here?"

He shrugged, jammed his hands into his pockets. "My head started hurting. All that music, all those people…so I came out here for some fresh air."

I gazed at the moonlit snow. "Pretty fresh air," I said. My teeth knocked together, shaking my words. "It's cold as an icebox."

Ben seemed surprised. "I can't feel it," he said, sounding genuine. He reached over and wrapped his arms around my bare shoulders to warm me. On any other day, I'd have minded, but at the moment his arms felt almost hot and I was just grateful for the heat. "Probably because you're in this frilly little thing, and I'm in ten-and-a-half layers."

I giggled, and the sound was more real, more solid. Ben and I weren't as close as we used to be, surely, but I'm not about to complain at the sudden intimacy of his gesture. I tried not to think about how soon my parents or the other guests would come looking for me. I had to tip my head back to look up at Ben. His blue eyes were far away, but when he noticed me staring at him, he looked down. He seemed…nervous. Afraid. He cleared his throat, a small little sound, and he said, "So, now you're at the age where you fancy someone, eh?"

I decided to go for honesty. I nodded. At least this kept my mind off everything that was waiting for me in the house. Ben chuckled. "Lucky fellow," he said.

I did not think about anything at all. I stood on my tiptoes and pressed my mouth onto his, tangled my fingers into the dark, unruly curls of his hair that he hadn't bothered to comb back. There, in a ball-gown, standing in the snow in the middle of the night, wrapped in Ben's arms, I felt as though I had never been warmer.

It's almost funny. I tried to protect my secret for so long, and in one sentence all my defenses come crashing down. It's…anticlimactic, to say the least. I stare at Cal, for a second certain I've misheard him. No, this can't possibly be how it goes, not in this simple little way, it has to be bigger.

Even worse, though, are Haddock's next words. "You've got him mixed up with someone else—this is Tintin! Famous boy reporter, solves all kinds of cases all over the world."

Cal shakes his head. His brown eyes are intensely focused on me, undeterred. He says, "No, this is Hannah—I'd know her anywhere. Tell him, Hannah."

I don't answer. I pray to be the one lowered into a six-foot-deep hole. Haddock looks at me, expectant. Cal's eyes are sharp, inquisitive. Hoping for it to go away won't make it go away! I chide myself. I say, "Don't call me that." My voice is low, but I'm pleasantly surprised to find that it's steady.

Cal looks a bit taken aback at that. Around us, people are streaming back to the street, to get into their automobiles or walk back to their houses. I desperately wish to join them. None of

them take notice of our conversation. Cal considers my statement, then presses, “Hannah? I know it’s you.”

“I’m Tintin now,” I say without thinking. I regret the *now* the second it’s out of my mouth. I could’ve just said *I’m Tintin*, and have it all done and over with. I don’t even have time to fathom why I would say that, or desperately wish I could re-do the conversation, or even think of comments to cover my tracks, because Haddock turns to me with such an expression of shock on his face, I immediately forget what I’m saying.

“Tintin?” he asks, just the one little word. He can barely get out my name, he’s so stunned.

Cal is looking at me like he’s expecting me to side with him, like he’s expecting me to agree and explain who I am, what I’ve been doing all these years. Haddock’s still got that awful expression on his face, and I can’t even imagine what I can say to fix this.

I know I’m being childish. It’s something I’ve tried to minimize since I turned fourteen. But for the life of me, I don’t know what to do, so I turn on my heel and I say, “I’ll see you at the car.”

I hear Haddock stammering something behind me, but I keep walking and don’t look back. Cal calls, “Hannah!” and I wince at that, but he doesn’t come after me. After a couple of moments, Haddock falls into step at my side. He’s totally silent, for which I’m grateful.

At some point, probably later today, we’re going to have to talk about it, but not right now. For the moment, I get in the driver’s seat, Haddock sits in the passenger side, and we just drive without speaking. Focusing on the road to Marlinspike helps me forget my worries for the time being.

Back at the hall, Snowy bounds out to meet me on the drive. When I kneel on the gravel to catch him, he licks all over my hands and face. We’ve been together so long, even a short separation is strange to both of us. “Have you been a good boy, Snowy? Been a good boy for Nestor?” I ask, and the fact that I sound enthusiastic to my own ears has got to be a good sign. Haddock is still silent, and I’m now not sure whether to be grateful for that, or alarmed.

The stiffly-mannered butler opens the door for us, lets us in. I start up to my own room immediately. “Tintin—” Haddock finally speaks.

“Please, not now, Captain,” I say, pausing. I don’t look at him, instead, I focus on the step in front of my face. “I need to be alone right now.” *I’ll talk about it later, I will,* I tell myself. There’s a sense of futility in trying to avoid it—he already knows, doesn’t he? But at the moment, I can’t think of anything past, Get upstairs, sit down, take a few deep breaths.

Luckily, he accepts it. Haddock doesn’t try to stop me, so I continue up the stairs to my room. Snowy follows me, a low whine in his throat. He can tell something’s wrong, a blind man could tell something’s wrong.

I close the door and slump down on the edge of the bed and put my head in my hands. Snowy pushes his nose against my leg, softly keening. “What am I going to do, Snowy?” I ask the

little white dog. Of course, there's no answer, though he looks as though he'd give one if he could. I stroke the soft fur of his back, feeling defeated. "I'm done for this time."

It's over, it's all over. Haddock won't want even to speak to me once he realizes the truth, who and what I am. I'll have to leave. I'll go back to my flat in London, I'll put Haddock behind me. The thought hurts more than I'd care to admit, but I have no choice. *I'll still work on the case, of course…Elizabeth deserves that much…*

I must have drifted off to sleep, weighed down by stress and troubles and what I'm sure is about to happen, because I open my eyes and suddenly it's dark out the window. Snowy is out of the room, though there's a little dent in the covers where he must have been before leaving to go stretch his legs or nab some food from Nestor. For a second, everything is fine. I just took a nap, I feel refreshed, all is well. I sit up, rubbing my hair back into order, then I look down and see my suit. All at once, it comes rushing back. I almost groan and I have to resist the urge to fall back into bed.

He knows, he knows, a voice chants in my head. It's all over now. I open my door, peer out into the hall. The house is dark, Nestor is probably asleep by now, if the large antique grandfather clock is anything to go by. I see a flickering orange light bathing the ground floor —coming from the sitting room, I'm sure of it. Haddock is in his favorite armchair down there, sipping Scotch and probably thinking of all the ways he can kick me out of his house.

At that, something in me snaps. Again, I'm surprised at my sudden decision-making. In cases, I'm usually rational, looking for a way to save myself, figure out the case, emerge unscathed as possible. But right now I'm on a dangerous route of self-destruction, and it's too late for rational thoughts, anyway. I justify it by thinking, *It's okay, he knows anyway.* That doesn't make it better, but it does make me angrier, angry enough to move quickly. I start with the silly padded jacket, the tie. I debate about the state of my trousers, but decide to leave them on. This is enough.

I'm resolved, I'm resolved, I know what I'm doing. But that doesn't keep me from trembling as I walk down the main staircase. "Haddock?" I call as I reach the entrance hall. My voice is too high, but at this point I can't bring myself to care.

I hear Haddock's gruff voice say, "In here," and just as I suspected, I find him in the sitting room, a glass of golden liquid beside him. He doesn't turn as I walk in, though he can surely hear my footsteps, my dress shoes tapping on the marble floor. I stand behind him, waiting for him to look at me, see and understand. He needs to turn around, so it can be over and I can go. But he doesn't move or say anything, just sips from the glass and sets it on the table beside him.

The last time I drank was…oh, good heavens, when? I can't even remember. But right now, I'm feeling brash, and maybe the Scotch will fully stop my shaking. I walk right up, grab the glass from the table, and down the whole thing in a gulp. My spluttering and coughing lessens my desired effect, but it's enough. Haddock finally turns, some surprised statement on his lips, and he stops completely at the sight of me, standing in the firelight behind him.

I stare at him levelly. It had been hard to leave my canvas undershirt in my room, but I'd forced it over my head. I tried not to notice how uncomfortable it made me feel to take it off,

fuelled by anger at myself for giving away my own secret, and exhaustion at having to hide all the time. Now, standing in front of Haddock with nothing hiding what I'd tried to hide for the past years, a sense of horror fills me. How could I ever think this was a good idea? What have I done?

I force out, "This is who I am, Captain," and try to make it sound belligerent. My voice breaks in an embarrassing way. The warmth of the fire, and the Scotch I hastily sucked down, are doing nothing for my shaking.

"Tintin—" Haddock starts.

For the second time today, I cut him off when he tries to talk to me. "What are you going to do to me?" I ask, voice stretched taut. It sounds like a stammer. "Sock me? Throw me out, call me a-a—" I can't finish my thought.

Haddock gets to his feet. He walks straight to me, looms over me. My heart's beating so hard, I'm sure it's showing on my skin. I look up at him, feeling my eyes start to sting. I wait for the inevitable: because this is it, the end, goodbye. Taking off my shirt isn't going to help anything.

Then Haddock puts both hands on my bare shoulders. I unsuccessfully try to refrain from flinching and looking away. He puts a thumb under my chin—a shockingly intimate gesture, in such a vulnerable place, and redirects my gaze back to his face. His eyes are unreadable. "Tintin," he says, and his voice is kind, soft. "I already know."

My whole body shudders, and I very nearly keel over. Haddock grabs both my arms to keep me upright, looking alarmed. "What did I do?" he asks. "Lad, what's wrong?"

Do you have to ask? I let out a half-hysterical, choking laugh and I realize I'm crying, tears spilling over my cheeks, down my face and onto my bare chest, and I don't even care, I can't care, I'm just so *glad*.

"I've been your friend for years, Tintin," Haddock says, settling back into his armchair. He's gotten me into my own armchair, across from his, as I try to recover from my crying fit. Captain continues, "I figured it out after a while. I think I'm the only one who knows, if that's what you're worried about."

I shake my head, cross my arms over my chest. Suddenly, there seems to be acres of skin that I can't cover. "Haddock, could I—your jacket, please?"

"Oh—right," he says. He hands his coat over without hesitating. I wrap it around my shoulders, infinitely grateful, and begin to button it. Haddock interrupts, "If you'd like, lad, you don't have to wear anythin'. The way I see it, you're a man just the same as me, and if I can go about the house without a shirt, so can you."

I can't bring myself to let go of the coat. I stare at my friend. Haddock looks relaxed, calmer now that I've stopped crying and I'm actually talking to him. Perhaps it's the Scotch, which

is just giving me a little of a warm feeling over my hands. I say, “I’m afraid I don’t quite understand, Haddock, how can you be so calm about this?”

He grunts, a coughing sound. “You never shaved,” he says, as if that makes it obvious. “Never. I noticed, and after that, I started noticing smaller things—your voice gets high when you’re nervous or surprised, and you always wear so many layers…I’m not as bright as you, but I pieced it together all the same,” he says with a good-natured grin at me, he’s smiling and we’re having a totally calm conversation, and I’m not tossed out of his house with the rubbish. I still can’t quite believe it. Of all the outcomes I could have predicted, this one was certainly not a possibility.

“And you weren’t…” I start, and I can’t think of any words to cover what Haddock’s reaction might be.

“Bothered? At first, a bit,” he says. “I took a quick jaunt to the Netherlands for a week, after I first was certain of it. I needed some time alone, to think about it. At first, I wanted to wash my hands of you, Tintin, but something told me that wouldn’t be good for me or you. I thought it over by myself, then one night I got a telegram from Thompson and Thomson, saying you’d been abducted and missing for days. I realized how foolish I was being—Tintin, you’re my best friend. You’ve stood by my side through it all, and I thought, *What kind of a man am I if I don’t do the same for him?*”

For a moment, I feel as though I might cry again. To stave it off, I chuckle, “That’s quite noble of you.”

Haddock actually blushes—not the full, purple-faced, humiliated, stammering blush, but a light red in his cheeks that is almost unnoticeable in the firelight. He says, “W-well, I’m not, but I thought it’d be decent, at least. You’re Tintin, and that’s all that matters—should matter, to anybody.”

A thought dawns on me. “But if you already knew, why’d you look so shocked at the cemetery today? I thought I’d scared you out of your wits.”

Captain looks embarrassed. His hat sits beside him, on the table, but he reaches up to his forehead as if to tug at the brim. When he realizes nothing’s there, he shakes his head and says, “When I came back from the Netherlands, I told myself I’d wait for you to tell me. If you wanted me to know, I would, so I waited, and you never told me.” I feel slightly guilty at that, though Haddock says it without a trace of accusation or annoyance. He continues, “So, I, well, forgot about it, quite honestly. I never thought about it. And today, it was just a shock hearing you say it out loud. I am getting quite old, you know.”

I laugh, less hysterical, thankfully. Part of me still thinks this is a dream I’ll wake up from in a couple of hours, but I hope to heavens not. I say, “I’ll bet you won’t remember this in the morning,” and nod toward the empty glass of Scotch.

Haddock barely glances at it. “I hope I do,” he says decidedly. “Then you don’t have to tiptoe round whenever we go to Hale.”

Hale. The case. Elizabeth. Despite my grim connection to the case, and the tragedy of Elizabeth's death, I feel hope blossoming in my chest. Everything seems so ridiculously easy and bright now. No more worrying about people calling out my birth name. No more whispered conversations with my mother, no more "You should go to the other room." Anything seems possible, even a totally impossible case.

"Now that we've had this little chat," Haddock says, extricating himself from his armchair and stretching his back with two loud cracks, "I think it's time to sleep, don't you, lad?"

I get to my feet, startled. "This is it?" I ask, surprised for perhaps the millionth time today. "You don't want to ask me any wild questions about what I am?"

Captain furrows his brow, seeming confused. "Er…yes…do you want me to?"

"No! No, I mean—usually people wonder about this sort of…thing," I say, gesturing to Haddock's coat, covering my chest (and a quarter of my legs).

Haddock looks at me, tips his head to the side as if inspecting my body, then he says, simply, "I hope you'll pardon me, Tintin, but I don't think anythin' needs to be asked."

At that, I lose my restraint. I rush forward, throw my arms around his shoulders. It takes him a moment to return the hug. I do manage to refrain from crying again, or saying, *Thank you, thank you, thank you,* even though that's all I can think to say.

Chapter End Notes

Terrifically sorry for the late update. Microsoft Word has decided I don't need to write anymore. Hope you enjoyed it!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“He kissed you?” Cal demanded. We were wading through the snow outside the house, in galoshes. It was early, the sun was just starting to peak above the mounds of snow. Usually my father wouldn’t even allow me out of the house at this time, but he was in London. (I’d felt a sinking in my belly when he announced this trip, but what was I going to do about it?)

“Yes,” I answered, huffing. I was too short, the snow was almost up to my knees. A heavy storm had dropped it overnight. I said, “About a week ago, actually. The girls were positively ecstatic.”

Cal tsked, easily stepping over the snow. “Can’t believe he had the guts,” he said.

“Well, I helped a bit,” I said with a smile.

Cal pulled a face at me. “Well, I’d like to believe that my old mate Ben made the move on you and you had no hand in the matter except your pretty face,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “Why?”

“To preserve my image of you, of course,” he said with a grin at me. “I can’t go round imagining sweet little Hannah kissing any boy she feels like kissing.”

I wanted to ask, Why shouldn’t I? *But I knew, because I was a girl, Ben was a boy, it’s different, et cetera unto infinity. I’d heard it millions of times. Instead, I said, “Let’s not talk about me kissing anybody—tell me, what’re we doing?”*

Cal sunk into a snow drift, I laughed at the look of surprise on his face and skirted the mound of snow. He pushed forward with a little difficulty and said, “Elizabeth’s mum says her silver bar’s been nicked.”

My laughter faded. I was well-acquainted with Elizabeth’s mum’s silver bar. It was the only thing of real value the family owned, and it was nearly all of Elizabeth’s inheritance. Mrs. Abbot kept it in a padlocked metal box, tucked under the floorboards of her bedroom, where nobody could even see it. Elizabeth herself told me about it under total secrecy, gleeful. The fact that it was missing was serious indeed. I said, “So we’re going to find it?”

“Course we are,” Cal said with a broad grin. “Cal and Hannah, amateur sleuths on the prowl. Criminals beware!”

“You know how my father feels about me getting involved in funny business,” I said with an over-exaggerated sigh, but I was already mentally preparing a list of questions to ask Mrs. Abbot. I wasn’t going to let my friend lose the most important thing she had—well, the most important thing in her opinion, at least.

“Yeah, but your father isn’t here now, is he?” Cal asked, eyes sparkling.

I frowned slightly at the reminder, but pushed it from my mind. I said, “I’m in, I’m in,” and struggled through the snow all the way to the Abbot household.

Elizabeth was working that day, Mr. Abbot was out in the mines. Mrs. Abbot was alone and nearly beside herself, but I managed to calm her down enough to find out the important information. She had come home from working, to find the window broken in, had rushed to her bedroom to find the floorboards lifted and the box out, empty. She only had one key, and she kept it with her at all times. The lock had been smashed with a mallet. Nothing else in the house besides the window was damaged. “Nobody knows where I kept the bar,” she sobbed. “I don’t understand how this could have happened.”

I looked all around the house for footprints, but there were too many to decipher—Mrs. Abbot’s waddling tread, a smaller, more delicate set belonging to Elizabeth. They surrounded the house in a swath of packed snow, making it impossible to determine where one set ended and another began. They were all fresh from this morning, any tracks from yesterday would have been covered up immediately by the storm.

“Did you notice any footprints yesterday?” I asked Mrs. Abbot, who’d followed me back outside with Cal.

She shook her head. “This morning, Elizabeth walked all around out here,” she said, then broke down in tears again. “I still haven’t told her—oh, heavens, when I tell her…I told her the window was broken by a bird!”

I rubbed my chin and crouched down to look at the prints up-close. When I stood and brushed the snow off my skirt, Cal was staring at me oddly. “What?” I asked.

“Nothing, it’s just—I’ve never seen a girl do that before,” he said, miming my chin-rub and crouch.

“Sure, you’ve seen me do that before,” I answered shortly. But I knew that was before, before I started wearing a brassiere and realized I wouldn’t ever be a man.

Cal only shrugged. I looked back at the tracks, and walked all the way around the house. I had absolutely no ideas, but I lied and told Mrs. Abbot, “I’ve got a few theories. I’ll keep looking.”

I felt a bit of guilt at that, but I hadn’t lied about the fact that I would keep looking. I just had absolutely no idea how someone could have found the box, locked and hidden beneath the floorboards of Mrs. Abbot’s bedroom, without even a little bit of random vandalism to the house itself. Were it a common burglary, the house would be ransacked, until the thief found any article of value.

“You’ve got no clues, do you,” Cal asked as we made our way back to the main house. He had to comb the horses this early in the morning, and I had to make my mandatory appearance at breakfast, looking clean and composed.

"It's all quite peculiar," I said, rather than admit that yes, I didn't really know. "There was no fuss—just a clean break-in."

"It's almost as if he knew what he was looking for," Cal said.

"Of course—somebody told him or her about the silver," I said. "But who would?"

"Eureka," Cal said sarcastically. I shoved him, with enough force to send him toppling into the snow. He pulled me down with him, ignoring my shrieks of protest about how my mother would be furious. Cal only grinned, pushing snow into the hood of my collar, when he looked up and the smile froze on his face. He slowly got to his feet, looking sheepish. Confused, I pushed myself up out of the snow and looked around to see Ben standing a couple yards away, staring at us.

"Hey, Ben," I said weakly, hauling myself out of the snow. He didn't say anything, just looked from Cal, to me, and back to Cal again.

Cal cleared his throat. "We weren't—I mean we were just—" He sighed and said, "I'm off, then," and walked away. I wanted to grab him and say, Don't leave me here! *but I remained rooted to the spot.*

Ben walked closer, looking a little embarrassed. "So, ah…how've you been?"

"Well, thank you," I said. We stood in our own spots, without moving. Cal cast us the occasional look over his shoulder, but he shuffled further and further away.

Ben fixed his eyes on his shoes, covered in crisp white snow. Then he blurted, "I didn't know you and Cal were together."

"What?"

"Because if I had known, I would have, well, not—" Ben sucked in a deep breath and stopped speaking.

Despite everything, I found myself grinning at him. "We aren't together," I said.

"No? But you—"

"Come off it, we grew up together! You and I used to do that sort of thing, remember?" I teased. Had we really? It seemed so long ago, it was nearly imaginary.

Ben flushed red, seeming flustered. I pressed my lips together to keep from smiling. "Y-yes, well—that was then," he stammered.

And this is now, *I thought. I remembered what Cal said, about how I should let Ben kiss me first, but Cal was walking away and he'd stopped looking at us over his shoulder. I stood on tiptoe and put my arms around Ben's neck, and kissed him.*

“He’s been out here all night,” Mother says, hands on her hips. She’s referring to Cal, who’s curled against the wall outside the house, his hands tucked beneath his head. We stand outside on the porch, it’s barely eleven in the morning and Haddock and I just arrived at my old house.

I crouch down in front of Cal, stare at his slack face. Snowy sniffs at him, then paws a bottle out from between his back and the wall. I frown at it. Haddock chuckles behind me and says, “Oh, poor fellow’s in for it now.”

Mother looks sharply at Haddock, but doesn’t say anything. *Well, nothing for it*—I reach out and shake Cal’s shoulders. “Cal?” His head only lolls back. I scowl and bring my face close to his, and yell as loudly as I can, “*Callum!*”

Cal jerks awake, blinking all around him in the bright sunlight. “Y-yes?” he asks.

“Get up,” I say, extending a hand and getting to my feet.

Cal squints up at me, then his face breaks into a sleepy smile. “Hannah!” he says. I flinch out of habit, though I now have nothing to fear. *That name again.*

Mother looks from me to the Captain, then she says, astonished, “You told him?”

“Of course he did,” Haddock says, a hint of pride in his voice.

I glance up at my mother and suppress a laugh at the expression on her face. She just shakes her head and says, “Of course he did.”

“What’s going on?” Cal asks. The smile has disappeared from his face, and his eyes are screwed shut against the bright sunlight. He’s still lying on the ground, propped up on one arm. I hold out a hand to him, and this time he takes it and pulls himself to his feet.

When he’s standing, I look directly into his eyes and say, “Listen, Cal, I know it’s early—” As if to disprove my point, the clock inside begins chiming loudly, audible even outside. “—but I have something important to tell you,” I say over the chimes.

Cal looks baffled and a little alarmed. “What is it, Hannah?”

“My name’s Tintin,” I tell him, refraining from shaking my head at the use of my birth name.

“Say that all you like, you’ll still be Hannah to me,” Cal says, shrugging. He's actually grinning now that he doesn't look so pained by the sun.

Haddock scoffed. Mother shakes her head. I'm surprised to see her looking irritated—she’d said the same thing to me, not so long ago.

I ignore that for the time being. “No, Cal, you don’t understand—I’m not Hannah anymore.” How do I say this? Even after explaining to Samantha, it hasn’t become easier. And I’ve no

wish to take off my shirt again. I say, slowly, “Hannah was the name of a little girl, but I was never a little girl.” Cal looks utterly perplexed.

Crumbs, I couldn’t be worse at this. I give up and opt for simplicity. There is a murder to solve, after all. I say, “Cal, you’re my friend. Can’t you just call me Tintin, because I want to be called Tintin?”

At this, Cal seems taken aback and a little embarrassed. “Well, yes, I suppose so,” he says. I feel a split-second of relief, then he continues, “What’s a pretty girl like you doing dressing up like a man all the time?”

Good heavens, Cal, you’re no good at this either. This certainly isn’t helping my simplicity idea. I furrow my brow and say, “I’m not a girl dressing like a man, I *am* a man.”

“What?” Cal asks, taking a step back from me. His “No, you aren’t.” I press my lips together and concentrate on anything other than his words. He looks to my mother for assistance, saying, “What does she mean?”

Mother opens her mouth to say something, but Haddock, who’s been silent this whole time, walks right up to Cal til they’re nearly nose-to-nose. “Blue blistering barnacles, look at him, boy!” he shouts right in his face. Mother jumps at his tone. Cal looks a bit nervous, as I’m sure anyone would with the Captain shouting in their face. Haddock continues, still shouting, “That there is Tintin, one of the finest men this world has known, and if you can’t see that—”

I catch Haddock’s arm before he bludgeons my childhood friend. “That’s enough, thanks,” I say sternly, but I have to keep back a smile. I can hold my own, and I’ve a lifetime of experiences to prove that, but it can be nice to have a friend help me. Haddock steps aside, scowling fiercely beneath his bushy eyebrows and beard. I put a hand on Cal’s shoulder, and pretend not to notice when he flinches a bit. I say, “I’m not Hannah any longer, but I’m the same person you’ve always known, and frankly there are more important things at hand.”

“Like what?” Cal demands, still looking angry.

“A girl we grew up with was murdered,” I say, a little disbelieving. I can’t understand how he’s more focused on *me* instead of the case, but I remember that a couple days ago I was more afraid of Haddock finding out the truth than of another murder occurring, so I suppose I don’t really have room to talk. I continue, softer, “If you want to quibble about who I am, we can do so after the murderer is caught.”

Cal nods, silent, and looks away. Haddock says, “There, now aren’t you ashamed? Bickering with Tintin while a killer runs about free.”

Cal glares at him, I quickly intervene before a fight begins. I say, “Do you know anything about what happened?”

He’s still glowering at Haddock, who simply looks amused. Mother still hovers at the doorway, standing next to Snowy. Cal finally says, “I don’t know anything. But Elizabeth was acting right odd the past couple days before…well, you know.”

“Odd?” I ask. I realize my hand’s still on Cal’s shoulder, I lift it and take a step back until I’m beside the Captain. Not that I’d ever admit to this, but it makes me feel a bit safer.

Cal looks between me and Haddock, and shakes his head. The Captain starts to say something, but Cal interrupts, “Odd. Elizabeth stopped eating with us, all the help take lunch on the back patio, you know. And she wouldn’t tell anybody what was bothering her, but she always was so nervous. Jumped at any little thing.”

I frown. Samantha hadn’t mentioned any of this, and neither had my mother. Perhaps she had an inkling she’d be hurt? I ask Cal, “And you have no idea what could have made her this anxious?”

Cal shakes his head, glares up at the sky like it’s to blame, and says, “I just woke up!”

I smile at the annoyance in his tone. Way, way back, when we spent all our days together, he wouldn’t do anything before noon. *That was when even Cal thought of me as another boy*, I think. The thought is somewhat saddening. I say, “Very well, I’ll be inside,” and brush past him into the house.

I hear Cal ask my mother, “Surely you aren’t playing along with her game?” I try not to take it personally. He hasn’t seen me in years, there’s bound to be a little bit of adjustment needed…

Haddock slams the door behind me, and Snowy yelps. I turn to make sure he hasn’t closed it on the dog’s tail, and am relieved to find him unscathed. Haddock still has that dark expression on his face. He says, “The nerve of some people!” I want to hug him again, but I settle for chuckling and nodding agreement.

I do a few rounds about the house, Haddock and Snowy following. At this point, I’m not even sure what I’m looking for. I skirt round the stain of beet juice on the wood floor. “Whoever it was went to lengths to make sure it looked like Elizabeth died in here,” I say, mostly to myself. “Of course, to pin suspicion on Samantha…but then, where was she stabbed?”

“In the mirrors,” Haddock jokes.

I turn around to stare at him. “What?”

“Oh, come off it,” Cal says, appearing at the top of the stairs a meter away from us. “You can’t believe that codswallop about the men in the mirrors.”

“You don’t believe it? Everyone in the house was saying there were men in the mirrors,” I say.

“All the women,” Cal corrects me. “The maids and Miss Pepall. The men never saw anything.”

“Did you ever look into it?” I ask him.

“I checked every single mirror in this house, even the new one downstairs,” he says, shaking his head. “Nothing.”

Something in that catches my attention. “New one downstairs?” I ask.

“Yeah—there was a new one put in the downstairs bathroom some months ago,” Cal says. His tone is belligerent, as if he’s annoyed I’m even asking this.

“Mother said there hasn’t ever been a mirror in there,” I say. Something in my brain is clicking into place—that little glass shard I’d found, that hadn’t come from any mirror.

Cal shrugs. “Well, she must have forgotten, because she never goes down there anyway,” he says. “At least not into that bathroom.”

“I think I’d have remembered asking for a mirror to get put in,” Mother calls from downstairs. I hear her footsteps on the stairs.

Haddock, who has been looking back and forth between Cal and I as if he’s watching a table-tennis match, asks, “Why’s it so important? A mirror in a bathroom nobody goes into, who’d bother with it?”

I turn to my mother and ask, “Have you gone out of town, the past few months?”

Mother considers it, then nods. “I visited London not too long ago,” she says. “Why?”

I rub my chin and stare down at the beet stain on the floor. I say, “You didn’t get a mirror put in, but there certainly was one. So, someone must have gotten it. Then they had to shatter it for some reason, and cleaned it up to make it seem like there was no mirror there at all.” *Except for that one little bit,* I think. There’s one piece of this puzzle, at least.

Cal tilts his head to the side. “But *why*?” he asks, looking like Snowy when the dog wants a treat.

I only shake my head. At least I’m getting somewhere, finally. I bound down the stairs, going to check round the house for bloodstains again. Haddock has to sprint to catch up with me. I wonder if Cal will come with me, and firmly tell myself I do not care what he does anymore.

My triumph wears off quickly. Yet again, the search turns up nothing. Mother finds Haddock and I scrutinizing the road outside the house, Snowy sniffing intently at the dust. “It’s lunch time,” she says stiffly. Haddock and I both look up, startled. I’m surprised she even bothered walking out this far, just to tell us about lunch.

We remain crouching at the roadside, waiting for her to say something else. When she stays silent, I say, “Do you want us there?”

Mother shrugs. “Callum has left,” she says, and turns, starts to walk back to the house.

I get to my feet. Haddock stares after my mother, dusting off his trousers. “She’s an interesting woman, your mother,” he says.

“You can say that again!” I say. We follow my mother back to the house.

When we get to the kitchen, a girl I don’t recognize is placing a plate in front of my mother. As my mother promised, Cal is nowhere in sight. I’m not sure whether to be grateful or disappointed. The girl looks up, startled, and Mother says, “Dorothy, get them some food, they look hungry.” She sounds nearly maternal.

I refrain from raising an eyebrow at her, and sit down beside Haddock at the kitchen table. The girl, Dorothy, returns to the counter and begins making plates for us. Haddock looks around the large kitchen, and Snowy settles himself beneath my chair, panting. “Where do you keep your Scotch, Miss Pepall?” Haddock asks my mother, tone polite. For a second, I’m struck by the normalcy of this—having a normal lunch, with my closest friend and my mother.

“I don’t keep any in the house,” Mother says, just as polite.

The illusion is shattered (or maybe is made more realistic) when Haddock chokes and stammers, “T-thundering typhoons, you don’t have any Scotch? What kind of a house is this?”

I look down so nobody sees me grin at my mother’s affronted look. I don’t even know why I appreciate Haddock needling my mother so. Perhaps it makes up for a childhood of her needling me. Dorothy sets down the plates—roast chicken—in front of me and Haddock. Snowy begins sniffing the air. He stands on his hind legs to rest his front paws on top of the table, inching closer to my lunch. I move the plate away and say, “Down, boy!” He continues to nuzzle at my hand, whining in the back of his throat. Mother actually laughs—a rare sound even when I was a child.

Haddock, still grumbling about the lack of alcohol in the house, digs into his own food as if he hasn’t eaten in months. We haven’t had a real, proper meal together in nearly a week now, it’s nice to take a break for once.

We don’t get to enjoy it for long, however. We’ve barely begun eating when the doorbell rings. Then it rings again, and again, accompanied by pounding on the door. Dorothy, ever-silent, walks out of the kitchen to the front door. I continue eating, sure it isn’t a pressing matter.

Then I hear Ben’s voice. “Where is she?” he asks. “Hannah, I know she’s here. Cal told me.”

Haddock turns to me, his face saying, *Again?* I sigh and stand up, wipe my hands on my napkin, and walk toward the door. I’m sure Ben’s interested in giving me the same dressing-down Cal gave me, I have to face it sometime. But when I see Ben, he immediately walks to me and grabs me by the shoulders. “Hannah, I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” he says.

“My name is Tintin now,” I say, preparing myself for the confused stares and the *What are you playing at?*

Ben only looks annoyed. “Fine,” he says. “That doesn’t matter. They’re coming here, Drake told me.”

“Drake? Who are you—”

“Samantha confessed to murdering Elizabeth,” Ben says. He runs a hand through his hair, panting. As opposed to the well-groomed, grieving priest I saw at the funeral yesterday, Ben is out of breath, disheveled from running. “Cal said you were here—you’ve got to go. The police are looking for you, they say you helped a murderer.”

In a flash, I’m moving, running back to the kitchen to get Haddock. “We’ve got to leave,” I tell the Captain, and tuck Snowy under my arm, ignoring his startled “Woof!”

“What?”

“I’ll explain once we’re away, but we need to go,” I tell him. The Captain nods, stands up. We make for the front door, but another knocking sounds.

“Open up! In the name of the law!” a gruff voice shouts.

I turn to my mother, who simply says, “Out the back door. I’ll keep them busy. Benjamin, stay with me,” she adds to Ben, who’s still busy getting his breath back.

“Thank you,” I tell her, amazed that she isn’t asking questions. But I’m not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Haddock and I run for the back door, through the huge, empty ballroom.

I distantly hear my mother open the door and say something, then there are pounding footsteps inside, running after us. In the split second it takes to realize Mother must have betrayed us, I break into a sprint, Haddock wheezes to keep up. At last, I duck through a smaller, unused guest bedroom and into the hallway that leads to the back door. We burst out, triumphant—only to find two more officers waiting for us.

“Hands up!” one says, aiming a gun at me. I set Snowy down and oblige immediately, my heart sinking.

“Oh, come off it, mate!” Haddock says, appealing to the officer with his gun trained on me. “Tintin didn’t do anythin’, he’s just—”

“Quiet!” The policeman shouts at Haddock.

The Captain opens his mouth to say something else, but I cut over him, “No, don’t—they’ll arrest you too, and that wouldn’t be good for either of us.”

Haddock is quiet for a moment, as one of the officers steps forward and handcuffs me. Then he asks, “What do you need me to do?”

“Look after Snowy,” I tell him. I’m already thinking about what to do, how to talk with Samantha to find out just what happened, wondering what *has* happened because I know Samantha couldn’t kill anybody, even if something had happened in the years since I last saw her.

“Aye, lad,” Haddock says, nodding. He follows me around the house to the front drive, where the officers push me into the seat of the police car. Snowy tries to hop inside with me, but the Captain calls him back. I gaze out the window, and pretend to be completely calm and collected. It’s worked for me in the past, at least.

The last thing I see as the police car leaves the drive, taking me with it, is Haddock standing outside the door with his mouth set in a grim line beneath his beard. He holds back Snowy, who’s howling loud enough to wake the dead.

Chapter End Notes

Again with the technical difficulties. I'm so sorry to do this but I'll probably be updating on Mondays now...due to my laptop being incapacitated, I'm writing this on my sister's laptop, which I only get a couple hours out of the week, and all of Monday since she has work. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I was sitting on my bed, reading a book on railroads, when I heard my father thunder, "Hannah!" I quickly got up and went to meet him in my parents' bedroom.

"Yes, Father?" I asked. He scowled at me, sitting in an armchair by the window. I thought frantically over the past few days, there was nothing I'd done that he could have known about, I wore my heels and everything. Mrs. Abbot certainly wouldn't have told on me for helping her out, would she?

"Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Nothing I can think of, why?" I asked, hoping I don't sound very impudent.

His scowl deepened. I was sure his forehead was going to be permanently wrinkled. Perhaps Mother, or the mysterious woman who received those necklaces, could iron it flat. But those thoughts were chased from my head when he said, "I'm referring to your relationship with Jacques' son, Benjamin."

Oh, Crumbs, *I thought. I managed to keep a calm outer exterior. "Yes, sir?"*

"How long have you been seeing him?" he asked. He got up from his chair to pace around the room, keeping an eye on me as though I was going to flee the house.

"Not very long. Just a couple weeks," I said. He gave me a sharp look and I hastily added, "Sir."

"When did you plan on telling me or your mother?" he asked.

"Well, frankly, I don't quite think you need to know," I said with a chuckle. I immediately regretted my words when Father froze in place and clenched his jaw.

"You didn't think we needed to know?" he demanded, staring at the floor. "That you were mucking about, kissing the gardener?"

"He's not the gardener, that's his father's job," I said, though Jacques had grown far too old to do much besides sit indoors and drink tea. Inside, my mind was racing—how had he found out? Who had seen us? I felt my temper ramping up. "And I don't think it's anybody's business but mine, who I kiss!"

"Hannah, when will you understand, you're not just some common woman!" Father snapped. I thought, Here we are again. *Whenever we talked, it just ended in fights. "You are a young lady who deserves—who needs a good husband, a good man to take care of her! Benjamin isn't wealthy enough to give you what you want, and he never—"*

“I don’t care about wealth,” I nearly spat, silencing my father. “I don’t care about what I deserve, or what I need, I can take care of myself, thanks!”

“Don’t you talk to me in that tone of voice—”

I cut my father off yet again. “Who cares if I see Ben? Even if I don’t marry him, what will happen? What’s so terrible about this?”

Father looks like he’s putting in a good effort to get himself under control. “I am trying to provide for your future, Hannah, and you won’t be able to find a good husband if there are rumors that you’re running about with servant boys. Rumors can damage a girl, make her less desirable. Do you want that?”

I clenched my jaw and kept my mouth shut. This was what girls do, right? Back down, see the voice of reason? At the thought, something snapped inside me. Heedless of my more rational thoughts, I said, “Alright, Father. Since apparently, you must know who I kiss, I get to know who you kiss.”

Father’s face was red, nearly purple with rage, but at this all color drained from his skin. He said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come off it,” I said. My doubts were thrown to the wind. “I know you’re seeing another woman. Who is she?”

Father just opened and closed his mouth one time and said, very quietly, “Hannah, this is different—”

“No, it isn’t,” I said. Then, increasingly reckless, I said, “Is she *a common woman?”*

“That’s enough,” Father said, walking to me. “This is not about me, this is about you, behaving like a spoiled child. Stop seeing Benjamin. Break it off today.”

“Only if you do the same,” I said. For a second, I feared he would strike me, but he just glared down at me, and brushed past me to walk downstairs.

Once he was out of sight, I deflated. All my rage left me in a single puff of breath. I slowly walked out, back to my room. My mother caught me on the way there. “Is everything alright?” she asked. “I heard you two shouting earlier.”

I looked at her. At a time, I knew, men would fight over her. But now, she had worry lines carved into her skin, her hair was just starting to go to gray. I said, “Nothing’s the matter.” I walked into my room, grabbed my book, and sat down to read and pretend nothing had happened.

Elizabeth came in about half an hour later, after I’d cooled down some. She had a fruit tart on a little plate and an apologetic smile. “Joanne said you’d been fighting with your da,” she said, setting the tart on my nightstand.

“Thanks,” I said, giving her a tired smile. “I’m always fighting with my father. This time, he wants me to stop seeing Ben.”

Elizabeth sat down beside me on the bed. "That's ridiculous," she said, with more force than I'd expect from her. "He can't tell you who to love."

"Love?" I asked, taken aback. "We've only kissed a few times, I'm not sure if it's love!"

"If you've kissed, then it's love, isn't it?" Elizabeth asked.

I frowned. "I don't know," I said. Had Mother only ever kissed Father, the man she loved? "Do you love James?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation. She looked surprised I'd even ask. "I'd do anything for him."

"Slow down," I said with a laugh. "You two haven't been seeing each other for long."

"He's going to marry me," Elizabeth said dreamily. Her eyes are faraway. "And we'll have little sons and daughters to play round the garden."

"How do you know he's going to marry you?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"He told me, of course," Elizabeth said. She looked around, then leaned in. "Can I tell you something?"

I chuckled. She could be so melodramatic sometime. "Sure, Elizabeth."

She leaned in close and whispered, "Mum told me a bird broke the window at my house—but I know who broke the window."

I stared at her, startled. "Who?"

She pressed her fingers to her lips, looked around, and giggled. She seemed like she was trying to elongate the suspense. "James," she said, finally.

"What?" I demanded, sitting up in my bed.

"Shh, shh," she said, looking around again. Her eyes were sparkling. "He went in to get the silver bar."

"What were you thinking? Your mother's worried sick!"

"I know that," Elizabeth said, exasperated. "She's so anxious over it, and she thinks I don't know. She won't even tell me it's gone."

"Why would you let James do that?"

"I told him where it was. Said he'd better get it quick, before he went to London, so he could get a good price for it and buy the house."

"The house—what?" I asked, perplexed. She was talking far too fast for me. I was still shocked by the fact that she would think to do such a thing.

“Our house, silly,” Elizabeth said, like she was talking to a four-year-old. “For when we’re married. We’re getting married soon, you know. He’s taking the bar to London, on a trip with his da, and he’s going to sneak off and get it pawned there. Then he’s going to look for a place for us in the big city.”

I stared at her. Elizabeth chirped, “He asked me if I had any money to put toward the house, and I told him to go into Mum’s bedroom while I was out. It’d look suspicious if nothing was broken, so he broke in.” She giggled.

“Why don’t you tell your mother?” I asked. I was trying to think rationally, ignoring Elizabeth’s ludicrous scheme. What was done was done.

Elizabeth frowned at me. “She’d never understand, of course,” she said. “But I trust James. He’s got the silver, he’s going to send me a telegram from London when he’s bought the place.”

I just shook my head, at a loss for words. Elizabeth said, “You won’t tell Mother, will you?”

For a moment, I was torn. Mrs. Abbot was terribly upset over losing the silver bar, but Elizabeth was my friend. Her plan was admittedly hair-brained, but she’d kept my secrets, didn’t I owe it to her to do the same? I sighed and said, “Alright, I won’t tell her. I think you ought to, but it isn’t my place to tell. I still don’t understand why you’d do it, in the first place.”

Elizabeth smiled, looking relieved. I regretted my decision already. She said, “For love, of course,” and stood. She patted my shoulder and walked out. “I’ve got to get back to work now, dear. I’ll talk to you later.”

I waved goodbye to her from my bed, the fruit tart untouched on my nightstand. I still didn’t understand it. If love meant abandoning all common sense, I never wanted to feel it.

When I turn up at Marlinspike, Haddock’s car is already covered and in the drive. It’s still drizzling, but it’s starting to slack off. My shoes, socks, and the hems of my trousers, up to my knees, are coated in dark mud. It’s been a long walk from Hale.

When I ring the doorbell, Nestor answers. The look on his face pulls a tired grin from me. “Evening, Nestor,” I say in the most dignified voice I can muster. “Would you mind letting me in? It’s terribly wet out here.”

Nestor, to his credit, recovers quickly. “Of course, sir,” he says, stepping aside to let me in. I toe off my shoes and leave them outside, then walk in. My wet feet squelch on the marble floor, but at least I’m not tracking mud all over the house.

“Nestor, who is that?” Haddock calls from upstairs. Probably in his bedroom, though I’m surprised he’s not in the sitting room at this hour of the day. It’s nearly six in the evening and

almost dark outside.

“Mr. Tintin, sir,” Nestor calls back. He’s still eying me like I’ve just risen from a grave. I suppose the Captain explained how I’d been arrested, Nestor was probably wondering how I’d managed to get out of this scrape.

There’s a moment of quiet. “Tintin?” Haddock asks—or, rather, squawks. I hear a brief scuffling sound, the door opening, and then he’s standing at the top of the staircase staring down at me in the same way Nestor is.

“Hullo, Captain!” I shout up at him, a broad grin on my face despite my exhaustion. Now that I’ve made it home, I feel safer, despite the fact that the police will surely come knocking here next.

Nestor walks away, shaking his head. Perhaps he doesn’t want to know how I managed to escape, he’s had enough of my antics for a lifetime, I’m sure. Haddock just stands at the top of the staircase, then he laughs and walks down to meet me. “Of course you escaped, lad,” Haddock says. “I’d expect no less.” He throws an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close enough to smell the whiskey on his breath. Then he plants a sloppy kiss on my cheek.

I barely have time to register it when he pulls away. Haddock mumbles, “Ah, I’m sorry, lad —”

“No, d-don’t be,” I stammer, running a hand through my wet hair. I stare at the floor. Nestor’s already out of sight, so I don’t have to worry about what he might say.

“All this whiskey must’ve gone to my head!” Haddock chuckles. He sounds far too cheerful. “How about you go get dried up? Then we’ll talk in the sitting room. You can tell me all about your daring escape, eh?”

“Right,” I say. Haddock lumbers off to the sitting room, and once he’s out of sight I nearly sprint up the stairs, almost slipping on the newly-repaired stair. In my room, I rush to change out of my wet clothes, slipping my tan coat off, then my sweater, then—

“He just kissed me,” I say aloud. The realization strikes me with such force, I have to sit down, my wet shirt half-unbuttoned. Captain Archibald Haddock just kissed me. On the cheek, but it’s the gesture that’s important. He’s drunk, but of course he’s always drunk, it doesn’t change that it was a kiss…perhaps it was a one-time thing?

A thought strikes fear into my heart, colder than anything else despite the fact that I’m soaked to the bone. What if…I can barely put words to the thought. Despite all his words, he doesn’t think of me as a woman, does he? He can’t, but, all the same, I did show him my chest…

I focus on unbuttoning my shirt the rest of the way, then tugging off my canvas undershirt. I pull on clean dry clothes and walk back downstairs, where Haddock is waiting with Snowy. The dog looks beside himself at my sudden appearance, jumping all over me, licking my hands and face.

“I’m back, boy!” I say, smiling at his antics.

“How’d you manage that?” Haddock asks from his chair by the fire. He sounds as though he’s just going to pretend nothing happened; the thought makes me strangely disappointed but at the same time, a little relieved.

I sit in my own armchair. Snowy hops into my lap, and I absentmindedly stroke his back. I say, “It wasn’t difficult in the least,” I say, aware I’m bragging a little, but enjoying the look of annoyance on Haddock’s face. I give up my suspense charade and say, “I let them drive me a little ways, then I got the door open, tumbled a bit, got up and started running through the woods. Lucky for me they never caught up!”

“And the handcuffs?” Haddock asks, nodding at my explanation.

“I ran with them on, until I got out of Hale. In the next town over, I found a blacksmith who cut them off,” I say. “Then I simply started walking here.”

Captain sighs and shakes his head. “Tintin, you will never fail to surprise me. Why’d you run? They’re going to come looking for you soon.”

“I can’t solve Elizabeth’s murder from jail, now can I?” I ask, allowing a small smile to slip onto my face. “I owe it to her, Captain. I don’t want another of my friends to turn up dead. I’ll investigate but be careful of the police.”

“You’re a brave lad,” Haddock says, chuckling. He stands to pour himself a glass of whiskey.

I feel something twinge inside me at the word ‘lad.’ Without thinking it through, I blurt, “I’m not a woman, Haddock.”

The Captain nearly drops the whiskey bottle. He looks taken aback, a little offended. “What? Of course you’re not, what made you think—”

I forge ahead without putting a stopper in my words. “I’m not going to be a woman for you, either. Haddock, you’re my best friend and I love you, but even I—”

“You love me?” Haddock cuts me off, his voice low.

I press a hand to my lips. Had I really said that? What have I done? Now I’m less sure. I stammer through my fingers, “Y-yes, you’re my best friend and—and I love you, but—”

“You love me,” Haddock says, and it’s a statement this time, filled with wonder.

“I’m not a woman!” I spit out, dropping my hand. Snowy turns to look up at me, a low whine in his throat, sensing the tension. “I’m a man, and whoever I love has nothing to do with—with—”

Now Haddock’s laughing. He seems to have a habit of putting off my major confessions, in ways I never expect. I stare at him, indignant. “*What* is so funny?” I demand, sounding like a petulant child to my own ears.

“Of course you’re a man, I didn’t fall in love with a woman,” Haddock says, wiping tears of mirth from the corners of his eyes.

Now it’s my turn to be shocked. I feel like I’ve just been struck at the base of my spine. My whole body deflates, sinking into the chair. Snowy barks as if he’s trying to figure out what’s going on, why the sudden mood changes. “You—you mean—”

“Yes, I do,” Haddock says, still chuckling.

“Then…what does this mean?” I ask. My voice is so quiet I can barely hear it. “We’re both men, and we love each other, and…”

“I believe the correct term is ‘homosexual’,” the Captain says, pointing to the ceiling the way I do when I make a breakthrough on a case. “Homosexual men and women have relationships, though they’re mostly secret, of course.”

This is just like what happened last night (was it only yesterday?) when I told Haddock the truth. This feels like a dream, it can’t be real, this is all too *perfect* to be real life. I stare at the Captain, unable to speak. He loves me. I love him. How is this possibly reality?

He looks over at me and says, “Well, we’re both fairly rational adults, Tintin—somehow, it appears we’ve fallen in love.”

He says it so simply. I try to recover my wits enough to laugh and say, “It appears we have!”

“We could—I mean, if you wanted to,” he says, and I’m surprised to see him blushing. This is all so easy, so simple, it feels like a storybook. He finally says, “We could be in a relationship. Not marry, that’d never be allowed, but—what do you think?”

For a moment, I consider it. Besides the added factor of kissing (the thought makes me blush far deeper than Haddock), it’d be much the same as our normal relationship. We do love each other, but--it's all too much, only yesterday we came to our understanding about me, and there's a murder to solve... I make up my mind as I open my mouth. “Captain, I do love you. But right now, I’ve got my all focused on this case, and I just don’t know how much thought I can put into starting a relationship.”

The Captain nods quickly. “I u-understand,” he says, the alcohol working its way into his tongue.

“You do?” I ask. Again, I’m reminded of that surreal feeling, I’m not entirely sure this is real. Perhaps I’m still slogging through the rain, lost in a daydream, or I’m sleeping in a jail cell.

“Of c-c-course,” he says. He stands and stretches, raising his arms above his head. “You n-n-need time.”

“No! Well, I do, but—”

Haddock walks (or weaves, rather drunkenly) to me, pats me on the back while I’m still stammering an explanation, and he slurs, “’M off to b-bed! We’ll t-talk ‘bout it more, l-later.” He staggers off in the direction of the stairs.

“Later,” I say weakly, and slump down in the couch. Snowy yaps, still sitting in my lap, all but forgotten. I look down at him and chuckle, “I do hope he remembers that in the morning.”

The next day, I meet Haddock on my way to the kitchen to snag some breakfast. He’s just coming back with an apple in hand, yawning, rubbing his bleary eyes. He’s still in his nightclothes. “Morning,” he says, voice irate.

“Hello,” I say timidly. My heart falls. Perhaps he did forget about it? Or perhaps it *was* just a dream, after all? I continue past him, heart sinking. Then I turn and ask, “Captain?”

“Hm? Yes?” he grumbles back, turning to face me.

“Do you remember—I mean, was last night—” Since when was I so tongue-tied? This isn’t like me at all.

Haddock stares at me, and the grumpy look slowly recedes from his face, leaving a much softer expression in place. In reply, he walks over to me and presses a kiss to my forehead. “Yes,” he says in a voice I didn’t know he was capable of. He gives me a small smile and starts to walk away, but then pauses and says, “Oh—Nestor says some old gal’s been phoning for you. Better call her back, apparently she’s been ringing all morning.”

He walks off, probably back to his room to get dressed. I grin, and continue on into the kitchen, my heart soaring. Nestor is standing by the telephone, looking annoyed. That seems to be a default expression for this time of day. When he sees me, he brightens considerably. “Sir, thank heavens—this woman is phoning every quarter hour and won’t cease!”

Right on time, the phone rings. Nestor looks exasperated and throws up his hands in defeat. He answers the telephone with, “Hello?” and a fuzzy female voice is heard on the other end. Nestor actually rolls his eyes and says, “He’s here now, do you wish to speak to him?” More of the female voice, then Nestor looks at me apologetically and hands over the telephone.

“Hello, this is Tintin,” I say pleasantly.

“Hannah, thank God,” a female voice says on the other end.

I sigh. “No, my name’s not Hannah any longer, I’m Tintin,” I say.

“Samantha told us we couldn’t call you Hannah,” the voice says. “Because that old man would find out. But now your mum tells us you’ve told him, so I don’t see why not—but anyway, that’s beside the point.”

I chuckle at the ‘old man,’ picturing the Captain’s response to that. Mentally, I make note to tell Samantha and fully explain to all the girls, all at once, who I am. “Who is this? Lucy, Joanne?”

“Lucy,” she answers. “I shouldn’t even be calling you, but I’ve got something to tell you, something important. It has to do with Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth. My laughter fades. “Yes?” I ask, somber.

“Her husband, he isn’t quite…” Lucy says, and there’s a pause. I imagine her standing by the telephone in my mother’s house, twirling a strand of hair round her finger as she tries to think of the word. Finally, she says, “He isn’t a good man.”

“What’s that mean?”

“He’s one of the men in the mirrors,” Lucy says.

I blink, startled at her sudden confession. “Nobody said anything about recognizing the men in the mirrors.”

“That’s because we don’t, usually,” she says. “But one time, I saw him. I saw him closing the door behind the mirror.”

“Slow down, slow down,” I say. “Door behind the mirror?”

“Yes,” she says. “We do see those, sometimes. There are doors back there, that they open and close, and that’s how they get behind the mirrors.”

What first sounded like a ludicrous fantasy or hallucination is slowly beginning to make sense. Doors, behind the mirrors, that—wait. “I saw behind one of the mirrors,” I say. “There wasn’t a door. And why didn’t you lift up the mirrors to find the doors behind them?”

“We did, but we didn’t find no doors. They might be secret, or they can only open from the inside,” Lucy says. Her voice has begun to shake, as if she’s afraid of getting caught. “We didn’t hardly believe it ourselves, what with the other crazy goings-on.”

“Other goings-on?” I ask.

Lucy sighs into the phone, a crackling of breath. “We all see things—the women in the house,” she says, barely a whisper. “Mad things.”

“Are you alright? Lucy?” I ask, starting to feel worry for her.

“I shouldn’t be telling you this,” she says, voice still quiet. “Samantha didn’t murder Elizabeth, Elizabeth’s husband did. I know you’re on the lam from the police, but you’ve got to come, Ha—Tintin, you’ve got to come.”

“Alright. I’ll be at your house in the hour,” I say, placing the telephone back on its hook. Then I run from the room, grabbing my coat from the stand by the door. “Snowy!” I shout up the stairs. The dog comes bounding down to meet me. I call, “Captain!”

“What?” the Captain yells back, muffled by his bedroom door.

“We need to go to Hale! Immediately!” I call. “I’ll meet you at the car!” Haddock says something in reply, but I don’t quite catch it. I’m already sweeping out the door, Snowy at my heels.

Then something hard strikes the back of my head, and the world before my eyes fills black.

Chapter End Notes

AT LAST, some long-promised Haddotin! (It won't get much more graphic than this though so if you're looking for that you might want to find a different fic). Sorry it's late as ever, hope you enjoyed it!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> IM SO SORRY THIS IS LATE ;_; I'm kind of the worst updater in the world. Also this chapter is from Haddock's perspective so yeah enjoy ^.^

Tintin tells me Hannah Pepall wore a light blue dress to her debutante ball. She wore matching heeled shoes and didn't trip over her own feet, as she usually did. When she was announced by the family butler, a man whose name Tintin has since forgotten, everyone looked at her and she felt her face go bright red. Hannah searched for the gardener's son Ben, who looked as though he too would soon become the Pepalls' gardener, once all the guests stopped staring at her. She couldn't find her boy, so Hannah instead went to Cal and traded jokes with him until her parents dragged her away.

After some mandatory conversation with an older fellow who was at least two times Hannah's age, she found Joanne standing next to the staircase, wearing a maid's uniform. Tintin says that most of the girls, as they grew older, had started working at the Pepall house as their mothers began to work less and less.

"Fine party," Joanne said, with an affected posh accent.

"Nobody throws a party like the Pepalls," Hannah said, though she sounded far more grim than her friend.

Joanne seemed surprised at this. "It's your deb ball!" she said, gesturing to the marble floor, the guests in fine clothing, the servants and maids scurrying about with trays of food. "Why aren't you enjoying it?"

Hannah shrugged and sat on a chair beside Joanne. "My parents want me to meet a man," she said, glum.

"Well, that isn't such a burden," Joanne said. "There's lots of handsome bachelors round here tonight—over there, that's Mr. Bishop, set to—"

"Inherit his family's estate, I know," Hannah said, genuinely grinning for the first time that night. "Mother and Father have told me about him at least thirty times. When I talked to him, he choked on his champagne. I thought the poor boy would keel over."

Joanne giggled and started to point out another man, but Hannah's mother pulled her away by the arm, saying, "Here, Hannah, I have someone I'd like you to meet."

Ignoring her daughter's quiet protests, she marched Hannah to a tall man who stared down at the girl as if she were a small bug he'd discovered on the doubtless spotless floors of his

home (these are Tintin's words, not mine). The stranger had curls of dark hair pushed back over his shoulders and dark blue eyes.

Hannah's mother made introductions and almost pushed Hannah at the man. "Mr. Jonathan Collins, would you like to dance with my daughter?"

Hannah turned to give her mother a pleading look, but before she could say anything Mr. Collins said, voice smooth, "Of course—it will be my honor."

He bent at the waist and kissed Hannah's fingers, and she nearly cringed. She looked at her mother one last time, but she avoided her daughter's eyes. Mr. Collins guided a reluctant Hannah to the dance floor and spun her round in a few simple waltz steps. Collins was a far better dancer than Cal, who gave her a broad grin from his place by the pianist. Hannah mustered a weak smile for her friend.

"So, Miss Pepall," Collins said after a few seconds of silence. "How are you this evening?"

"Well," she said in a little voice. "And yourself?"

"Better if you smiled," he said, looking down at her with those cold blue eyes. There wasn't a trace of humor in his gaze, he spoke the words as if threatening her.

Hannah finally met his eyes. "If it's a smile you want, dance with another girl," she said, glaring up at him.

"Your mother told me you might behave this way," Mr. Collins said, with an exasperated sigh. He lifted Hannah's hand to spin her, she only obliged for fear of him stepping on her toes. He continued, "We have a mutually trusting relationship, however, so I told her I would do her a favor and dispel any rumors of your honor."

Hannah pulled herself from his grasp. "Rumors of my honor?" she snapped, not caring that a few of the guests were staring at her as she and Mr. Collins stopped moving in the sea of dancers. Tintin always smiles when he tells this part.

Collins seemed embarrassed by the sudden attention. He took her by the hand and pulled her off to the side. "Your mother entrusted me to help, I don't wish to disprove her faith in me," he said.

"Very well, but why do you need to help?" Hannah demanded.

Collins looked around and said, very quietly so he wasn't heard above the piano music, "There are rumors that your honor has been besmirched. It is my job to quell them. Anyone knows I am not the type to associate with girls who would be…unsuitable as wives."

Hannah felt anger bloom inside her, heating her stomach. "If this is about Ben, I assure you, my honor remains." She began to walk away, but Collins' next words stopped her in her tracks.

"Such a shame that the only man able to attest to that fact is locked away in seminary," he said in an idle voice.

Hannah turned to face Mr. Collins. "What did you say?" she asked.

"Your mother assured me the issue had been taken care of," the man said, still in that bored tone. "Perhaps she was mistaken."

Hannah stomped back to him, stood as close to him as she dared, and glared up at him. "What issue? What do you mean?" she asked in the politest voice she could manage.

"You don't know?" he seemed genuinely surprised. "Your parents were under the impression that you would have heard by now."

Usually, at this point of the story, Tintin chuckles and says that Hannah had to refrain from grabbing Collins' shoulders and shaking him. Instead, she snapped, "Heard what?"

"They paid the gardener to send his son to seminary," he said, unperturbed by Hannah's obvious impatience. "He left this afternoon."

Hannah sucked in a deep breath. In the corner of her vision, she saw her mother approach, sensing a conflict. "My parents told you this?"

"Of course," Collins said. "They couldn't have you two going about like that. People talk, you know, and you'd never find a good man."

Hannah very nearly slapped him then. "Ben is a good man," she said, nearly spitting the words at him. "Far better than you will ever be."

She saw a look of shock on his long pale face, then she turned and stormed away. Her mother caught her in a few steps. "Hannah, what are you doing?" she asked her daughter. "He's a nice young man."

"You sent him away," Hannah said, furious. "You sent away Ben and didn't even tell me?"

Hannah's mother pressed her lips together and didn't say anything. Her father appeared over her mother's shoulder and said, voice stern, "You know precisely why we did it—because we knew you would behave like this."

Hannah was speechless. Her father continued, "We paid Jacques handsomely—enough to retire, as well as tuition for the seminary. It will be good for Ben, and for you."

"Who I go with isn't up to you to decide," Hannah snapped.

Her mother looked around, anxious, at the guests beginning to stare again. She said, "Hannah, dear, please don't make a scene. It's unbecoming."

"I don't want to be *becoming!" Hannah nearly yelled, paying no mind to the people watching. She stormed out of the room, heels clacking on the floor. After she had calmed down some, she found herself outside, on the lawn. She pressed her knuckles to her mouth, wondering what she would do. She didn't want to even look at her parents.*

“I heard about Ben,” Elizabeth said from behind Hannah. She spun around to see her friend, looking tired and worn, standing on the grass in her uniform.

“Elizabeth,” Hannah said cautiously. Her friend had barely spoken to Hannah for the past week, since she got a letter from a boy named James that he was moving to France and would never see her again.

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth said. “It’s a rotten thing to do to someone.” She sounded genuine.

“I just don’t know what to do anymore,” Hannah said with a weak little laugh. “I can’t…I’m not the girl they want me to be. No matter what I do, I never will be.”

“I know,” Elizabeth said. She stepped forward to meet Hannah. “That’s why I brought you these.” She pulled a pair of simple brown lace-up shoes from behind her back. Hannah accepted them, puzzled.

“Thank you, but—”

“I don’t know when you’re leaving, but I know you are leaving,” Elizabeth said, almost fervent. “You’re getting out.”

Hannah was taken aback. “What do you mean? Of course I’m not leaving.”

“You are, don’t even try to deny it,” Elizabeth said. “It’s for the best. You can’t continue here.”

Hannah looked at her friend. A part of her wondered if her friend had gone mad, but she felt something turning in her. A spark. This was it, this was the answer. This was how to get out. “I can’t leave,” she said. “Where would I go? It isn’t safe for a girl to travel alone.”

“You’ll have to get to the next town and buy boys’ clothes—I couldn’t find any,” Elizabeth said. “I don’t even have a pair of scissors to cut your hair, but that’s alright. Just run.”

“Run?” Hannah echoed. “Run where?”

“Run to Ben,” Elizabeth said, with such emotion in her voice that Hannah finally understood. Her friend didn’t want Hannah to end up like her. “Run to Ben and get him away from Southwark seminary—it’ll be easier from there.”

Hannah stared at the shoes in her hand—a boy’s shoes, far better for travel than the ones she had on. Tintin still has no idea where Elizabeth had got them, they looked to be the perfect fit. “I’ll leave tonight,” Hannah said slowly, testing the words out. They sent a thrill through her.

“Good, good,” Elizabeth said.

“I’ll leave now,” Hannah said, making up her mind on the spot even as she wondered what she could possibly be thinking.

“I hope you make it,” Elizabeth said. She seemed to be totally genuine, earnest. “I would never tell anyone—they don’t need to know, they would chase you down.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said. She slipped off her heeled shoes. “Should I say goodbye to anyone?”

“That would give you away. No, don’t tell anybody,” Elizabeth said. “They’ll be alright. Go, now, before someone comes out here and sees us.”

Hannah slid on the boys’ shoes, head still reeling. First, Ben was shipped away, now she was running away from home? It all seemed quite fast, but for some reason, it felt as though it were the right thing to do.

“I’ll try to get word to you,” Hannah said. She left her shoes with Elizabeth, who promised to hide them. “When I can, if I find Ben, I’ll try to get word to you.”

“Just go,” Elizabeth urged her. So Hannah went, without another word to her friend. In that frilly blue dress, the last one she would ever wear, and a pair of boy’s shoes she walked through the lawn, past her house and into the forest, as if walking in a dream.

When she emerged from the forest, she was no longer in Hale, and the sun was rising. She made it to the nearest town, Little Bollington, just as the shops were opening, and ducked into a clothes shop. Though she was still reeling from the last events, she knew what she had to do.

“I’ll trade you,” she told the first man she saw in the clothing shop. She gestured to her dress, a fine make with satin frills.

The man looked her up and down and seemed to take pity on her. He only asked, “What for?”

Hannah very nearly cried, according to Tintin. The man led her to the boys’ clothing at her request, and when she picked out a blue jumper, pair of brown trousers, and white socks he didn’t question her. He showed Hannah to a small backroom where she changed out of her blue dress and into the boys’ clothes. It’s safer this way, *she told herself.* I’m still a woman—no changing that.

When Hannah came out and handed her dress off to the shopkeeper, he looked at her and said, voice gruff, “If you’re going about as a man, you best get rid of all that hair.”

He sat Hannah down and cut off nearly all of her hair. She watched it leave her scalp and flutter to the ground, and she felt nothing—Elizabeth and the other girls had been so upset when they had to cut their own hair, but all Hannah felt was a strange, lingering sense of relief. When the man finally brushed the loose strands off her shoulders and handed Hannah a looking glass, she could hardly recognize herself. Her hair was so short, it stood straight up from her head, particularly the longer tuft above her forehead.

“There, no mistaking you for a lass now,” the shopkeeper said, wiping off his scissors. “Are you a man or a woman?”

“A-a woman,” Hannah stammered, surprised at the question. She stood, brushing hair off her new clothes.

“No. You’re a man now,” the man told her. “If anyone asks, you’re a lad whose parents died last month. I don’t know where you come from, or who you are, but not everyone will be like me—understand? People will want to ask you questions and you need answers to them. You need to take care of yourself. Lucky you found me—so who are you? A man or a woman?”

“I’m a man,” she said in a small voice.

“Good. Pick yourself a name. Now get on, before your parents send police out,” he said. “Good luck, lad.”

She left the shop with her heart pounding. And, as Tintin puts it, that was the end of Hannah Pepall.

The Hale police are a useless load of ignoramuses. When I go into the cramped headquarters building with Snowy at my heels, they say that they haven’t seen Tintin since he hopped out their car the day before. I swear one of them is picking his teeth with a piece of grass.

“Maybe she ran away,” one man says, his voice twanging with a thick country accent.

I want to sock the daylights out of him, but I refrain. “This is Tintin, *he* would never run away from a case,” I say, trying to keep ahold of my temper. Were Tintin here, he would put his hand on my shoulder to hold me back. But he isn’t here, that’s the whole trouble, and Snowy looks far too melancholy to do much besides follow me round and look for his master.

The men exchange a glance. “You mustn’t know her very well, then,” one of the younger men says, sliding his hands into his pockets.

“For the last time, you lot of blithering bird-brains, your friend Hannah doesn’t exist, it’s Tintin, and he’s a *he*,” I insist. I may have stumbled on some of the wording there, but I got the point across, at best.

But the officer just shakes his head, his oversize cap wobbling on his head. “Okay, well, sir, I was there when he ran away from home. Her—his mum had us searching all night, through the next day. I wasn’t even an officer then!”

I roll my eyes and say, “Oh, pardon me, I didn’t realize it was such a burden to look for a lost child!”

The man shifts his weight from foot to foot, looking uneasy. Dithering baboon. Another man speaks up. “It ain’t nobody’s fault, sir, but it makes sense—going gets rough, so does he.”

I take a deep breath. These men haven’t seen Tintin since he stopped going round in dresses and got a new name, they don’t know what kind of a man he is. It isn’t their fault. I want to give the officer a black eye, but I can’t find Tintin if I’m locked up, and I don’t trust my own abilities to get out of jail.

So instead, I turn on my heel and walk out, with Snowy following. Tintin would be proud of me. I walk out of the headquarters, back to my car. Snowy is far too small for the passenger seat—he seems to realize this too, and curls up in a ball, looking more sad than ever.

I drive to the Pepall house, unsure of where else to go. A maid answers the door, looking frightened, when I knock, and before I can speak she holds a finger to her lips to be quiet. Startled, I forget all the questions I was planning to ask. I follow her inside, into the totally silent house. I know this kind of silence, it presses in on your ears when something bad has happened. The maid leads me up the staircase, and I gradually make out the sound of muffled sobbing.

Oh, I think. Snowy whimpers, almost in sympathy. The maid quietly knocks on the bedroom door, a bare tapping. I hear rustling footsteps, then Miss Pepall opens the door, looking totally exhausted. She's in her nightgown, her red hair pulled back in some sort of bonnet.

"M-Miss Pepall," I stammer, wishing for some whiskey to make my words flow better. "Y-you look…well."

She only rolls her swollen eyes and sniffles. "What do you want," she says.

"Have you any idea where Tintin's gone?" I ask, folding my hands behind my back. That looks and feels wrong. I slide them into my pockets. Even worse.

"If I had any clue, do you think I would be crying in my room?" she demands while I'm having a crisis over what to do with my hands.

I sigh and rub my beard. I did think this would lead me somewhere, at least. Perhaps it would be a place to start. Miss Pepall lets out a shaky breath and turns and walks into her bedroom, gesturing for me to follow her. I do so hesitantly, Snowy trailing me. The maid shuts the door after us.

"Do you drink, Captain?" she asks, going to the bottle of wine on her bedside table.

I eye the green glass longingly. "Well, yes—" I start. She begins to pour a glass, and I stop myself. "But I prefer Scotch. I don't really like wine." I won't be able to find Tintin if I'm stumbling all over creation, either.

His mother stops pouring, shrugs, and sets the wine bottle back down. "Suit yourself, sir," she says, and downs the contents of the glass in one go. I blink, taken aback.

"For an old woman, I can drink, eh?" Miss Pepall says, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth.

"Er—yes," I say, unsure.

"I never drank, except at parties," she says, pouring another glass. "Then Hannah left, and suddenly that was all I could do."

I press my lips together. I have no idea what I can say. Pepall sighs and continues, "There was no question she left. It was only a matter of time. Her father thought someone had kidnapped

her—had the police combing the woods for weeks. But she never came back to us. We never saw our daughter again."

I finally speak up. "You have a son now, ma'am," I say, as gently as a man like me can say anything. Confound it all, I'm not good with this sort of thing.

"Yes, I do," she says, her voice faint. But at least she's not insisting that Tintin is Hannah, like all of Tintin's old friends seem to do. She adds, "And now I might never see him again, either."

"Of course you'll see him again," I say, scoffing. *Unless that fool lad's gotten himself killed,* a worrying little voice says in the back of my mind. I try to tamp it into silence.

"He's run away again," Miss Pepall says, taking smaller sips of wine.

"No, he's been kidnapped," I insist, voice steady and sure. I'd never doubt Tintin—he always finishes what he's started, unless something, or usually someone, gets in the way.

She sinks down on her bed, wineglass clutched in her hand. "Samantha didn't even do it," she says, sighing. "That girl couldn't kill the flies that got in the house. There's no possible way she could kill Elizabeth."

"Have you told that to the police?" I ask. "You seemed content to let her battle it out with the officers the day Elizabeth was killed."

"I told them, of course I told them," Miss Pepall says, getting tearful again. "But they wouldn't listen to me. When Tintin told them, of course they listened. The famous boy reporter. And we drove him away again."

"You didn't drive him away," I say, with more force than is probably necessary. "He was taken away. By who, I have no idea, but I need you to help me find him."

"How?" she asks. "Even if he wants to be found, even if he was just kidnapped—where do you start?"

I think of all the times where I was the one saving Tintin (it's been known to happen!). The lad *is* somewhat harebrained, always getting himself into some scrape or other in his quest to 'get to the bottom of things,' as he puts it. All these times, however, have usually involved little brainpower on my part. I say, "I think we were both lucky."

This gives Miss Pepall pause. After a moment, she says, "Say you are right. And Tintin has been kidnapped—does this happen often?"

I actually laugh, despite the circumstances. Snowy jumps. "You could say that," I tell her.

Miss Pepall nods, absorbing the information. "I trust you, Captain," she says, finally. I heave a sigh of relief. That will make things easier, at least. She continues, "Because you love my son, and you know him better than I ever did."

I feel my face redden. Even with the talk we had last night, it feels strange to admit to it, much less have someone else acknowledge it. Fortunately, Miss Pepall doesn't seem to expect a reply. Unfortunately, she continues with, "He loves you too, you know."

Yet another thing that feels strange to have someone else discuss. I cough, clear my throat, and say, "Y-yes, he's told me. But, ma'am, Tintin's life might be in the balance?"

"Right, right," she says. "I apologize. Where shall we start?"

I think back to this morning. Tintin had gone into the kitchen to answer the phone—it had kept ringing for him, I remember. Then he wanted to leave directly after that. Perhaps it had been someone with new evidence? "Do you know who called Tintin this morning? They were quite insistent. Then he immediately wanted to go to Hale—so the call must have been from Hale."

Pepall frowns. "I haven't spoken to him since yesterday. We can ask the maids, they know everything that happens in this town."

The woman sounds far more confident now that she has some direction. She sets the wine glass down on her bedside table, and I'm surprised that she doesn't waver or stumble a little bit. She turns to me and says, "Excuse me, Captain, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Er, why?"

"I must change, and I'm certainly not going to do so with you in the room," she says, almost snapping at me.

I stammer something even I can't decipher and I hurry from the room. After a few minutes of quiet waiting with Snowy, Miss Pepall comes back out, now wearing a plain dress. Without any further ado, she says, "Well? Are you coming?" She doesn't wait for an answer before turning and walking down the stairs.

"Glad we're getting somewhere," I mutter, even as I jog to keep up with her. *Well,* I think, *Tintin has to get his briskness from someone.*

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> Terrifically sorry this is late as always--I just moved houses and haven't had any wifi for the past week. I PROMISE, 100%, unless I die or something I'm going to be on-time with all the rest of the updates til this is finished. Enjoy! (Sidenote, I'm not too sure about the geography--I did my best with Google maps but if someone sees something a tad bit off pls let me know)

I knew it wasn't going to be an easy going. I'd seen maps of England, knew the general direction in which I would be heading. Southwark is kilometers away from Hale, but I'd nowhere else to go, so I was determined to make it. However, I wasn't prepared for just how difficult it would be. I tried to beg automobile rides from the few drivers on the roads, but nobody would take a dirty little street urchin.

My clothes got muddy quickly, and it only took me a day to stoop to begging, when I reached a little village known as Ellastone. The rich Hannah Pepall, begging in Ellastone. Imagine if Mother could see me now! *I thought, sitting on the street corner with my hands held out.*

Once I had a few pennies, I ducked into the closest bakery and bought bread. Cheap, and sure to fill me up. I sighed and leaned against the brick wall to eat, uninterrupted. Then I was back to walking.

I spent my first night on the street in that little town. I wasn't sure what to do—I couldn't believe I was actually awkward at being homeless. I didn't fit in with the other urchins, which couldn't be good. I wound up curling up on the ground with my back to a wall of a building, in a quiet area that didn't seem to have any frightening people. I slept uneasily, always imagining I heard some sound, always starting awake and wishing desperately I had a weapon of some sort. I finally fell asleep only because I was completely and totally exhausted.

I woke early, began walking again. The shoes began to chafe my feet, especially as they got wet. I hadn't walked much in a while, certainly never this far. And I knew I still had days to go before I got to Southwark.

Aching feet aside, the countryside was lovely. I had never seen much of anything outside of Hale, so it was quite a surprise to find that the world beyond my little town was so beautiful. The people were all so different. Back home, everyone at least could recognize most everyone else, or know someone who knew the other person, et cetera, et cetera. Here, nobody noticed me, I was just another grubby boy in the street. I was glad of that, I wanted to escape notice if at all possible.

I stopped early in Tamworth. I didn't have enough money for even bread, and none of the passersby could spare a coin, so I went hungry and reassured myself that this wouldn't kill me, I could go a day or two without food (my stomach, however, disagreed). I slept a little better that night, despite my growling belly.

The next morning, I woke to find something warm nestled up against my chest. I opened my eyes and saw a pile of dirty fur lying against my belly. My first wild thought was that it was a rat, my second was that it was a rabbit. I pushed myself up a little, ignoring my complaining joints, and the thing turned round to face me. I was startled to see a little gray puppy staring at me with soft, wet brown eyes. I tentatively reached out and stroked a finger along his fur, and he started wagging his tail.

"Hello, there," I whispered, wondering at him. He didn't look like an average stray, he wasn't skittish—he was still curled up against me, trusting and unafraid. I scratched the dog behind the ears, and he rolled over for me to rub his belly. I smiled at him.

I became distantly aware of people moving round and talking behind me. I was lying in an alley, alone, but not for long if the daytime traffic was any indicator. I stood up, trying not to disturb the little dog, but he bounced to his paws, tongue lolling and tail wagging.

"I have to go," I told him, as if he could understand me. What a shame I can't bring him with me, *I thought. He seemed to be a sweet little dog. I'd never had any sort of pet growing up—Mother was allergic, and Father insisted that such animals only brought diseases, at any rate. Cal had allowed me to pet the various animals his father allowed him to bring home, cats, dogs, even mice, and I'd always envied his pets.*

With one last regretful look at the little dog, I turned and started away. I didn't even notice he was following me til I was well out on the street, amidst the bustle of the morning, and a tall, burly man nearly ran into me, with a snapped "Watch it, boy—and mind your dog," he added as he came quite close to stepping on the pup, who dodged his large feet like it was second nature to do so.

I stared at the dog and walked back to him. "Quit following me!" I told him. "I have no food, I have no water."

The puppy just stared up at me, soft ears flopping on either side of his brown eyes. He whimpered, a quiet, sad little sound. I forced myself to give him a stern glare, though all I wanted to do was to pick him up and carry him with me. I couldn't find enough food to feed myself, let alone a pup I'd just stumbled upon. Besides, he probably had an owner, or at least a mother and a litter of brothers and sisters to go home to.

I turned and walked away, checking back over my shoulder twice to make sure the dog was no longer following me. He sat patiently on the ground, eyes fixed on me. When I looked over my shoulder the third time, the puppy was entirely out of sight, hidden by the legs of townspeople eager to get to their jobs and open up shop for the day. I pressed down my feeling of guilt at leaving someone else behind, and continued walking, through Tamworth, onto the country road. I didn't look back at that little town.

The next town over was Atherstone. It was even more tired-looking than the other small villages I'd been in, all the people moved about their daily routine like the wind-up tin soldiers of children. The houses were spread apart and there was one solitary butcher, who doubled as the town baker. I stopped into his shop because I was so hungry I could feel my head beginning to spin. The butcher, a stern-looking man, surveyed my grubby state. "Money?" he asked.

I shook my head, feeling helpless and desperate. The butcher jerked his head to the side, motioning for me to leave his store. Dejected, I did so with my shoulders slumped, and slid down til I was seated against the side of the building. I contemplated turning back then, while I was still close enough to Hale. It would be a rough couple of days, complicated by increasing hunger, but surely I could make it. At the worst, I could find police to take me home, before I was beaten or worse on the roads.

Then the dog appeared before me. My first thought was that he was a hallucination brought on by hunger and thirst, but I scoffed at the notion, I'd only been hungry a day or two. I swear the puppy nearly had a grin on his canine face, pleased at having followed me without my notice. He fastened his little white teeth in the sleeve of my jumper and tugged, pulling at me until I got to my feet and followed him round the building to the back, where a rubbish bin was nearly overflowing with refuse. As I got closer, I could see that it was food from the butcher shop—rejected cuts of meat, most raw, but with a few cooked bits scattered here and there. There was a corner of stale bread that sat at the top of the heap, and I ate that first, giving no thought to embarrassment.

Of course, I gave the dog some, as well. He seemed to prefer the raw meat, so I gave him the pieces that were too red for my liking, and ate the rest, only stopping when we were both full. I rested a while in the shade behind the butcher shop, then got to my feet and walked on, unsurprised (and perhaps a bit pleased) when the dog began following me again.

The next days were monotonous, broken only by sleep, stopping to beg coins from passerby, and consulting various individuals about the location of Southwark to ensure we were walking in the right direction. I grew used to my aching feet and stopped caring entirely about my muddy clothes.

Then something like a miracle happened. On the fourth or fifth day, I'm never sure which, I asked an elderly fellow in Milton Keynes how far away from Southwark he believed us to be. The man stood outside a sleek black automobile, carrying two bolts of red cloth to place inside the car, and he simply regarded me with wordless surprise for a moment.

"My dear boy," he said, "That must be kilometers south of here."

I felt my heart sink. I looked down at the unnamed gray puppy, whom, it seemed, would follow me to the ends of the earth. He whined, looking just as saddened as I by the prospect of walking much further. The man looked back and forth between us and said, "Would you like me to drive you there?"

It took me a moment to process his offer. When it dawned on me, I began nodding so vigorously I feared my head might roll off my shoulders. "Yes—please, sir."

The old man chuckled. "I'm going west of there, to Wembley. It only makes sense to take you along, no sense in having you walk."

"The dog, too?"

He squinted down at the puppy, then said, "Eh—I don't see why not. Get in, both of you."

I was so grateful, I didn't entertain the notion that he could have been a criminal, that he could have pulled a knife or a gun on me. I didn't even consider that he might be taking me to my parents, back in Hale. As it happened, I got lucky. I fell asleep the instant I was seated in his automobile, the pup dozing on my lap. I woke hours later, when the man stopped to put in petrol, and the attendant didn't give me a second look. Though it was a strange feeling to have in a total stranger's car, I felt safe.

The next days passed in a blur of scenery, talking with the old man, whose name I suppose I'll never know. He never asked for mine, either, only talked about unimportant things like the weather and what I planned to do in Southwark (reunite with a friend, which I suppose wasn't a lie). As it turned out, the man's daughter was a seamstress, living in Wembley, and he had to go pick up an order of fabric for her because she was too busy.

"She has her own shop," the man said, a touch of pride evident in his voice. "Though I officially own it, because nobody would sell a building to a woman. It took them some getting used to, but now everyone goes to Melanie's shop, run by a woman or no."

"How old is she?" I asked him. During the time of this conversation, the pup lay sleeping in my lap, which he seemed to do whenever he could.

"Just twenty-two years old," the man said, and beamed out the windshield onto the wet dirt road.

"Don't you—" I hesitated, unsure of how to phrase it without sounding rude. "Do you worry she won't be able to find a husband? With how…independent she is?"

The man stared at me, seeming astounded. "Melanie doesn't need a husband," he said, as slowly as if he were speaking to a child. "She's got her shop, she can take care of herself. Besides, she has no shortage of suitors as it is!"

I considered his words, reveling in this newfound information. A woman didn't need a husband? A woman didn't have to play the perfect coquette to have suitors?

"What do you do?" the man asked, focusing on driving again.

"Me?"

"You're obviously fairly independent yourself," the man said, chuckling. "And you've made it this far. Do you work?"

I thought about how to answer his question, because of course I didn't, I hadn't lifted a finger to work a day in my life. But if I told him that, he would know something was amiss—all boys

work growing up, especially country-raised boys whose fathers wanted to groom them to take over the business someday.

"I write," I said on impulse. As a child, I'd enjoyed it, certainly, but I hadn't written in ages.

The man grinned, and I noticed that a few of his teeth were missing. "A journalist in the papers, hm?"

I shrugged, feeling my face color with heat. The old man crowed, sounding as elated as if I were his own son and I'd done something particularly noteworthy. "Not yet? I'll keep a watch for your picture! I'm sure I'll see you soon enough."

I laughed uneasily, but for a moment, I entertained the idea. I could write under a male pseudonym, travel the world to report on stories across the globe, go where I pleased…the idea was surprising in that I'd never even considered such a career before, but I enjoyed the picture all too well. Then we went over a bump in the road, the pup was jarred awake, the man focused on driving again, and I reminded myself that I would find Ben. Then we would figure out what to do, together.

We arrived in Southwark within two days, sleeping in the car, the old man completely trusting of me. He even shared his food and water with me. When we arrived, he dropped me off at the first street corner I pointed out. I had no idea where the seminary was, and I didn't want him to have to drive all over Southwark. I wished I had some money to give him, or anything to give him to repay his kindness.

When I told him this, he chuckled and said, "You owe me nothing—any decent man would do the same. I hope you find your friend." Then he was off, his automobile rolling over the uneven cobblestone streets, the black paint shimmering in the midday heat. Despite the fact that I'd only known him for a couple of days, and didn't even learn his name, I realized I would miss him. He was friendly and never gave me any trouble about who I was, where I came from.

I looked down at the pup, tucked under my arm. "Just us, hm?" I told him, then with a final look at the departing car, I started off in the direction of where I guessed the town's center was.

It wasn't the town's center at all—the road I took dead-ended in a street of bakeries and other restaurants. I was beginning to realize that this was perhaps the biggest town I'd ever been in, bigger even than Hale, and it would be difficult to navigate. The puppy wriggled for me to put him down, and when I did, he trotted at my heels, following me devotedly.

I ducked into the first bakery, where I could see a young woman behind the counter. "Which way to the seminary, miss?" I asked her.

The girl, who might have been just three years Ben's senior, dusted her hands off on her flour-coated apron before answering me. "That's clear the other side of town," she said, and I bit back an exclamation of disappointment. She surveyed me carefully, looking me up and down. "Are you looking for someone?"

I nodded. "A friend."

The girl scrutinized me carefully, her dark eyes probing. I found myself tugging at my dirty jumper, conscious of how it clung to my chest and hips. "You aren't from round here, are you?"

"No, miss," I said. I noticed that her voice was strangely pitched, almost too high.

She nodded, almost thoughtful. Then a male voice called from the back room, "Rebecca!" and she turned to answer the call, pushing through a curtain of brown cloth to get to the room, presumably the kitchen area. She paused in the doorway and said, "Turn round, turn right on the first street you find, then turn right after that, and go straight. You'll reach the seminary in an hour or two."

"Thank you," I told the curtain as it swung closed behind her. That was three times I'd been helped by total strangers, and if I'd known the world would treat me this kindly, I would have left home years before. I walked from the bakery and followed her directions, the dog padding at my side.

I made one or two wrong turns, but it was fairly easy to reach the seminary all the same. I got there about mid-afternoon, judging from the sun, and several students were out in the courtyard, doing work. I stood outside the wrought-iron fence, gazing in at all the boys working diligently on work. I looked for Ben's dark hair, and was unable to see him.

Suddenly, a bell tolled loudly, causing me and the dog to jump. The students in the courtyard filtered out, replaced by older boys. I strained to spot Ben, then, there he was, setting a bag of books down at the foot of an oak tree, settling down onto the grass beside it. He looked totally different, though he'd only been in the seminary a week. He had none of his usual confidence, he walked with his head bowed and he looked completely…

Peaceful, I realized. Ben, the wild boy who ran with the bad crowd from town, appeared peaceful. His face was almost blank, with little focus. I wondered what had happened to change him so. He pulled a book from his satchel and began to read it, unhurried, flipping through the pages at his own leisurely pace. I'd expected a rebellious boy, sullen at his fate, or even depressed, saddened. I hadn't expected anything like this.

I gazed at him, so calm, locked away in his own little world. I looked down at myself, my muddied clothes, nearly ruined shoes, and I realized he probably wouldn't recognize me. I thought, And what will he do if he does recognize me? Run off? Leave this behind?

I got the answer to my musings a moment later. A cat appeared in the courtyard, on Ben's side of the fence, stalking after a butterfly that leapt through the air. The dog, standing at my side, immediately jumped at the bars of the fence, straining to get through to the cat, barking for all he was worth in his high little puppy voice.

One by one, the faces of the boys inside the courtyard turned to look at us, as I tried to quiet the dog and escape scrutiny. The cat, totally unbothered, sauntered away. Ben looked up, gaze languid and uninterested in the commotion. The moment seemed to hang, suspended, and I froze with my fingers in the dog's scruff, half-bent to pick him up.

Then Ben's eyes slid past me. The moment crashed to the earth, bringing my heart with it. Ben returned to his studies, the puppy's barking finally subsided into a short series of yips, then silence. The boys stopped staring at me. I walked to a bush and crouched down in the shade, out of sight of the road and the boys in the courtyard.

I pushed my hands through my short hair. A part of me was settling into this, processing this new information and plotting what to do next. Perhaps I'd expected this, I certainly hadn't planned on Ben spiriting me away, I only came at Elizabeth's request, in the vague hope that he would be able to help in some way. But this peaceful boy who fit in here far better than he'd fit anywhere else, he couldn't help me at all, and I could hardly ask him to leave this behind. The thought of leaving him behind hurt, I knew, I still refused to call it love but it was certainly something close to it. But this was a kind of hurt I could survive.

I'd nowhere else to go—though the obvious answer was to turn round and go home, I'd rather starve on the streets. No, the only things waiting for me in Hale were safety and dresses and a life of endless unhappiness. The dog sat down by my feet and keened softly in his throat. I absently rubbed his ears and considered my other alternative, which was simply taking to the road again.

I could probably find work somewhere in Southwark, enough to get back on my feet. I'd have to stay a boy, and the thought pleased me in an inexplicable way, but I didn't dwell on that. I rationalized that it would be safer that way. But somewhere deep down, even then, I knew I was just searching for a more concrete reason to give myself.

I stood, brushed off my trousers. The dog stood with me, panting in the hot afternoon sun. Together, we walked back to Southwark, leaving Ben—the last part of my past—behind.

I come to in total darkness. For a moment or two, I'm not entirely sure if I'm awake, then I feel the dull pounding at the base of my skull, and with a groan I struggle into full consciousness. I'm in a room, that much is evident. I can hear wind nearby, and total silence besides that. I can smell a strong scent of dirt, and petrol. "Hello?" I call into the darkness. My voice only echoes back at me, without any other response. Apparently, I'm alone.

And I'm bound, wrists and ankles lashed together. I pull against the ties, feeling that my wrists are tied together in front of me, and a length of rope secures my chest to some sort of support column at my back. My legs are bound together at the ankles, and more cord pulls my legs against the support pillar. I struggle against the bonds for a moment, then decide it's best not to waste my strength. My head still aches and spins if I move too quickly.

I remember the blow to the back of my head, delivered with something hard and heavy—likely a piece of wood, perhaps even a club of some sort, definitely not fists. I don't know where that gets me, but it helps to learn a little about my situation.

Suddenly, a flickering orange light appears in the right lower corner of my vision, illuminating the room around me. I struggle to see in the new light, and find I'm in a

toolshed, surrounded by rusty gardening implements. It isn't particularly large, and the pillar I stand against is at the very center, supporting the ceiling that's still invisible to me. I still can't see my captor. "Hello?" I call, pulling against my bonds again. "Who's there?"

A chuckle—definitely masculine, I decide—sounds in the gloom. "It's useless fighting, boy," he says. "You'll never get out of those ties." He sets the light—a small lantern—on top of a shelf, and I'm finally able to discern his face. I'm surprised to see he looks familiar to me, but I have no idea where or when I've seen him before.

"Who are you?" I demand.

"Doesn't matter," he says, unconcerned. "You'll be dead soon, anyway."

"Well, if it's all the same to you, I'd quite like to know who's killing me," I say, putting a touch of bluster into my tone.

He crosses his arms over his chest and stares at me. "You're a tough boy, aren't you?" he asks. "Tintin, the world-famous journalist. I'll be world-famous for putting a bullet through your little skull."

"I highly doubt it," I tell him. "Even if you do kill me, what are you going to do? Turn yourself in to the police?" *Keep him talking, keep him talking, buy yourself time,* I tell myself, trying to steady my heartbeat. It's a tactic that has worked for me in the past.

The man leans against the wall of the toolshed, as if we're just holding a normal conversation. "True," he concedes. "I won't be famous in my lifetime, but they're going to talk about me long after I'm gone. Crime of the century, taking place in a little backwater English town nobody's ever heard of."

He's deranged, I realize. Seeking fame, not even money. It's a strange motivator, one I'm never able to understand. I attempt to collect my thoughts, and say, "You're one of the men in the mirrors?"

It's a guess only, a shot in the darkness (literally), but the man says, "Well done, Tintin!" and gives me a mocking round of applause. "Yes, I am one of the so-called men in the mirrors."

He seems to be in no hurry, and that's just as well. My brain is working quickly, thinking of what to ask him next. I carefully ask, "How many more are there? For curiosity's sake."

To my surprise, he considers the question, then says, "Just three more—Lenny works somedays, but not often. No, it's just us four, and sometimes Lenny."

Lenny. I don't know any Lennys and I'm nearly positive that I never did, but it's a start, at least. "And why the ruse?" I ask. He raises an eyebrow, and I quickly add, "You're going to kill me anyway."

The man hesitates further, but he finally answers, "I thought it would be clear to such a famous genius."

I laugh at that, despite the circumstances. "I'm no genius," I tell him. "Just a reporter."

He stares at me, then, to my disappointment, changes the subject. “Right you are, the intrepid reporter,” he says. “A lot of people cross the globe are going to be quite pleased to hear about your death, I reckon.”

That isn’t what I want to hear, but it does strike a chord in me. He has a point—all the criminals I helped put away, members of drug rings I broke up, of undercover organizations I helped expose—they’d be cheering when they heard that the ‘little ginger pipsqueak’ who managed to foil their plots had been killed, in a dank little toolshed with nobody round to hear. I feel panic rising in my throat, and push it down firmly. “I expect you’re right,” I say.

The man shrugs, unconcerned. “Well, since you’re going to die,” he says. “I think someone might as well know—besides Elizabeth, that is, though you’re going to end up like her soon enough.”

Elizabeth. The name makes it all click into place, and I finally recognize him. “You’re Elizabeth’s husband,” I say. “You were at the funeral—with your boy—”

“Right,” he says, pleased I’ve made the connection. “A silly girl she was, but she proved herself useful in the end. She gave us a way into the house, and without that, we wouldn’t even be here.”

He sounds so cold, so detached. It’s hard to believe this is his deceased wife he’s talking about. I clear my throat. “Why did you kill her?” I ask.

“She knew too much,” he says. “And she was getting frightened—the other maids suspected something was happening. So she thought to lock us in while she ran to the police. But we knew what was happening. We got out, through the downstairs bathroom mirror, and I caught her going up the road to the Pepall house.”

We didn’t see any blood, I think, suddenly dizzy. But that was easy enough—he’d thrown some dirt on the blood to soak it up, dragged her body back inside the unlocked house, poured beet juice all round her, and tried to pin it on Samantha, because nobody else could have done it.

Something else occurs to me amidst this revelation. He said ‘Pepall house’ and not ‘your house.’ He doesn’t know who I am, doesn’t know Miss Pepall is my mother. Surely I can use this to my advantage—I’m just not sure how, yet.

Another man walks into the shed, announced by heavy, trailing footsteps. I vaguely recognize him from the funeral, but I’ve no clue who he is. I’m more concerned by the fact that he’s going to complicate fighting my way out of here. I wonder who else is outside the shed. “Is it done yet?” he asks Elizabeth’s husband.

“Not yet, Lenny,” he says, languid. “I’m just having a little chat with him.”

“Well, would you quit dawdling and get it over with?” the second man, Lenny, demands. His eyes are shifting in the lamplight. “We need to get a move on with the last shipment.”

I put all the information together in the moment Elizabeth's husband, whose name I still don't know, reaches onto the shelf and lifts a gun from it. "You're shipping drugs," I say. "You're shipping drugs, and you're using the Pepall house as a safe place to store—behind the mirrors. There are rooms back there," I guess wildly, adding Lucy's clue about doors behind the mirrors.

Lenny hesitates, looking to Elizabeth's husband, who is perhaps the leader. He looks amused, and nearly impressed. "Yes," he says, setting my head reeling in a way that has nothing to do with the concussion (and I've certainly had enough of those to know one right off). "Whoever built the old Pepall house put space between the walls. But you're wrong about the drugs." He sounds as though he's enjoying this, stretching it out, lengthening the suspense. Lenny, however, has no such qualms.

"It's guns," he spits out tersely. "Now would you hurry up and kill him?"

Elizabeth's husband, looking slightly resentful at having to end the conversation so soon, levels the pistol at my head. I struggle against my ties, and a thought occurs to me. "You've been crawling round my house for weeks, months, and I never even knew—not even since I came back—"

It's a fairly obvious ploy, but to my immense relief, it works. The gun wavers. The man behind it hesitates. "What?" he asks after a moment of heavy silence. "*Your* house?"

"You don't know?" I ask, doing my best to sound unconcerned about the fact that there's a gun still aimed at my head.

"Didn't know what?" Elizabeth's husband snaps.

"That I'm a Pepall myself?"

The man stops, lowers the gun entirely, to the displeasure of his companion. "Kill him!" Lenny commands, but the other man just regards me with confusion.

"You're not a Pepall," he says, slowly. "Drake told us there was only one—a girl—and she ran away years ago, never heard from her since."

"Drake," I say, and if I'd ever been told before that his name would give me hope, I would have laughed in my informant's face. "Bring him to see me. He'll recognize me, he'll know I'm Miss Pepall's son."

"There was only a daughter," Lenny insists, but at least he's stopped clamoring for my death.

"How sure are you?" I ask.

They exchange an uncertain glance. I forge ahead, taking advantage of my newly gained time. "If you don't kill me, you can ransom me to my mother—for a handsome fee, I assure you."

Elizabeth's husband huddles close together with the other man, whispering in voices I can't hear. I desperately hope they don't piece together that if they ransom me off, I'll be able to

turn them in to the police. Finally, Lenny straightens, and says, “We’re taking you to Drake,” he says. “So he can confirm—and we don’t want to leave you here unguarded.”

My heart soars. It’s just these two, then, there’s nobody else guarding the doors. “If you’re lying to us,” Elizabeth’s husband says, shaking his head in an unspoken threat.

I nod fervently. “I understand, I’m not lying,” I tell him. Lenny sighs, and both the men walk over to me. Elizabeth’s husband trains the gun on me, while the other man kneels down and cuts the ropes tying me to the support til my hands are tied together in front of me, but I’m free from the pillar. Lenny works on the cord that pulls my ankles against the support. My mind races, preparing for my next move.

The second I feel the length of cord loosen, I kick out as hard as I can—not at Lenny, but at Elizabeth’s husband. I feel my foot connect, hear a cracking sound, and he cries out, dropping to one knee, and releasing the gun. I dive for it, snatching it before he or Lenny can retrieve it, and I get to my feet, holding the gun on my captors. It’s surprisingly easy, after all that fear and worry. They both hold their hands in the air, eyes comically round and surprised.

“Don’t fret,” I say. Adrenaline rushes through my veins, letting some strange sort of humor into my voice. “I won’t shoot, unless one of you tries to follow me.”

The two men exchange a glance, then they rush me. Elizabeth’s husband goes for the gun in my hands, which discharges into the air, blowing a hole through the ceiling, while Lenny tackles my ankles, trying to take my feet out from under me. I frantically try to reclaim the gun, bravado lost, and I feel a hot tearing sensation at the back of my knee. Then the pain kicks in, and I have to grit my teeth against it, I force myself to focus on getting the gun back. *Bragging was stupid, stupid…*but too late for it now.

I wrestle my arm down and bring the pistol butt crashing on top of Lenny’s skull, and he crumples in a heap at my feet. Before I can reach it, Elizabeth’s husband takes up the knife, which glitters with blood—probably mine, I realize, but the thought is distant and the gravity of it doesn’t reach me. The leg of my trousers feels wet, and the pain is still pulsing there, burning and sharp all at once, but I push it aside for now and tell myself I’ve had worse. Probably.

“There’s another man,” Elizabeth’s husband says, nearly snarling the words. His nose has been hit sometime in the fray, blood runs down and reddens his teeth and chin. “He’s coming at any minute. Give it up, or I swear I’ll put this knife through your throat.”

“Not before I can send a bullet through yours,” I counter, hoping against hope that this madman at least has some sense of self.

He hesitates. Then he charges at me, knife held low, pointing for my belly. I’m ready. I’ve fought off far better fighters than a couple of fame-seeking arms-smugglers. When he gets close, I grab his wrist and give it a sharp, strong twist, which brings his other hand out of play as he involuntarily reaches to cradle his injured arm. I give him a sharp punch to the bottom of his jaw, and he collapses.

I take a couple of deep breaths. The pain kicks back in, but I continue to push it away, focusing on the adrenaline pumping through my veins—not that it'll fix the gash in my leg, but it helps keep me moving, at any rate. I take up the cord that was used to tie me down, and I bind Lenny's hands and feet together, then the other man's, and relieve him of the knife. Blood still running from the back of my leg, I escape, pushing out the shed door into the cool night air.

It's almost morning, I can see the sun rising faintly in the distance. The leaves of the trees are faintly outlined in the dim light, the dead leaves of autumn crunch under my feet as I stagger through the forest. All that, though, pales in comparison to the single burning need to get out of this forest, make it back alive. Elizabeth's husband said another man was coming, probably to check on them, any minute now, and I don't even know where I am. How can I get out? How can I avoid the other man? What am I going to do about my leg?

Leg first, I tell myself. I'm never going to get out of here unless I tend to it. I find some shelter, beneath the branches of a fallen tree that conceals me sufficiently only because I don't trust my ability to walk anywhere further, and I pull up my trouser leg and prepare for the worst.

I'd expected a gouge from my knee to my ankle, but while there is a long diagonal slash along the back of my calf, it isn't as deep as I'd thought. It hasn't severed the muscle, at least, but it definitely requires medical attention from someone more skilled than I. It's bleeding profusely still—perhaps an artery has been severed. In lieu of tearing at my trousers or my jumper, I remove one shoe and tie one of my long socks round my leg in a tight, inelegant knot, like a tourniquet, just above the wound. I push myself to my feet, and am alarmed to feel the world spin beneath me. I stagger slightly, then force myself to press onward. It's probably a combination of the head injury and the blood loss, I realize, and the thought frightens me. Stranded in a strange wood, no clue where I am, concussed and losing blood rapidly probably isn't going to end well.

I still forge through the woods, with the vague notion that I must be heading east, into the rising sun. To motivate myself to keep moving, I tell myself, *If you don't get back, they'll all escape. The other man will come back eventually, he'll free Lenny and Elizabeth's husband, they'll get in that last shipment, and not a one of them will go to jail. Samantha will languish there, possibly die there or even be executed, and she's innocent, I know she is, she might have been pressured into confessing or…but that's beside the point, they're going to get away totally innocent, if you don't go back. You'll never hear the Gypsies' music again, you'll never see the Captain and Snowy again—*

The Captain. Snowy. I haven't thought of them at all since I woke, only scrambling to find an escape. My heart sinks, picturing them running about the countryside, the Captain tearing at his hair in frustration, Snowy crying and whining and trying to find me when I'm right here, stumbling round some glade I've never even seen before.

I'm still thinking in this manner when I come to the gradual realization that I'm no longer upright. At some point, though I can't be sure of when, I've fallen face forward onto the leaves, and I'm lying on my belly with my face turned to the side. "You need to get up," I tell

myself aloud, but my voice sounds weak and unconvincing. I push to my hands and knees, but my balance isn't working well enough to help me get upright. I fall back down.

The adrenaline has deserted my system, leaving me weak and unable to muster up energy to do anything but lie here and try to recover. I'm barely sure which way is up to begin with. For all I know, I could be lying on my back in the sky, the earth above me, but no matter where I'm lying down everything is still spinning round. I take a deep breath, then another. My leg hurts a little less now, or maybe I'm only getting used to it.

Just before a black wave of unconsciousness sweeps over me, I see a face, fuzzy outlines, blonde hair. Not the face I want to see, lacking the dark beard and moustache and semi-permanent sailors' cap. This other man is someone I know, but I can't place him immediately, just like everyone else I've met today. His voice is loud, too loud. But his arms, scooping me from the ground or maybe the sky, are kind and as soft as my Captain's.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> Before you read this, I know binding without a good binder is a terrible idea. In this chapter there's some binding involving tying strips of cloth around the chest, AND I KNOW THAT'S A BAD IDEA I AM NOT PROMOTING IT. I really hope nobody's using this fic as a binding guide. This is fairly straight-forward but I figured I'd include this note to make sure. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I did well being homeless in Southwark—at least for a little while. I looked for work, but nobody would hire a grubby little street urchin. I stayed in Southwark because I had no other destination in mind, and never saw Ben again. When I couldn't find work, I begged, and split all my food with the little dog, who stayed by my side without wavering. It was a simple life. Rough, a great deal more difficult than I was used to, but I adjusted, little by little. It was far more exciting, far more interesting, than the life I had led as Hannah Pepall. And I much preferred going about as a boy, rather than wearing the silly dresses and heeled shoes I'd had to wear as the daughter of a prominent businessman. I enjoyed my new life for a whole week.

Then I began noticing a group of boys who, while they didn't exactly follow me outright, always seemed to be nearby. They usually perched on the curb at the corner across the street, murmuring amongst themselves and occasionally giving me little looks, when I walked around begging for pennies. There were four of them, all round my age or slightly older, and they all had mean, hungry looks on their faces. I'd seen those kind of boys in my travels to Southwark, and I'd been careful to keep away from that type. But these boys trailed me. I switched streets, and they'd be there within the hour I moved, watching me. I began sleeping in well-lit, busy areas, though that was dangerous because the police often rounded up the homeless who frequented such areas, and prayed I wouldn't get taken by the officers, or stabbed to death in my sleep. My little dog growled quietly whenever he saw them, though they didn't seem to hear. This went on for about a week after I first noticed them.

Then, one night, I waited til it was late and I headed to the river for a bath, taking my dog (I couldn't help but think of him as mine, now, it had been nearly two weeks) and hoping it would be deserted enough I could get in and wash, without being disturbed. Perhaps if I looked a bit cleaner I stood a better chance of finding honest work.

I didn't even notice them following me, that night, until I was well out of sight of the rest of town and standing by the river bank. I was just looking around for people before I stripped out of my clothes, when my dog began growling at something behind me. I wheeled around to see nothing, but I called, "Hello, who's there?"

I saw a silhouette of a man detach from the shadows of a nearby building. He started walking to me, and I readied myself for a fight, fists up. As he got closer, in the moonlight, his face was thrown into sharp relief—stubble, gaunt cheekbones, eyes like two black, liquid pools. "You g-got any m-money, boy?" he asked, voice low. There was something off about his voice, as if I were hearing it through a muffler.

"No," I told him, still tensed to fight.

"Don't l-lie to me," he said, walking closer. I could smell the bitter scent of alcohol on him, driving down to the bottom of my throat. "I k-know y-you have, I saw y-you begging. Y-you m-must help me."

I took a few steps back, knowing it was a mistake even as I did so. I was backed up against the river, now, and though I could probably wade into the stream to get away, I had the feeling I'd have some difficulty doing so. My dog began barking, his hackles raised.

"I don't have any money," I said, and closed my fist around the few pennies I had in my pocket. I couldn't throw away my money for some drunk, no matter how menacing he was—heavens knows if I'd be able to get more. "Go beg someone else."

The man's features creased into a scowl. He advanced slowly, then swung a fist out at me. It was surprising and sudden, but it was sloppy. I easily ducked to avoid it, but missed his other arm coming in to grab my shoulder. My dog barked and leapt at him, sinking his little teeth into the man's arm, but he only cursed and threw the puppy off in a single movement. I tried to reach into my pocket for the pennies, because even my only money wasn't worth this, but he apparently mistook it for me going for a weapon and he grabbed my wrist in a grip like iron. I tried to muster up a scream, but I was so frightened it came out as a soundless huff of air.

"W-where is your m-m-money, b-boy?" he demanded in his slurring voice.

I tried to say something, but I could hardly breathe for fear. My heart was pounding so hard I couldn't feel it in my chest. Finally, I managed to squeak, "Pocket," and he looked down to where he was holding my wrist so tightly I thought he might break it.

He reached down to my pocket, but before he could push my hand aside and grab the coins, something knocked him sideways. I was startled to recognize one of the boys who had been following me for the past week, his fists raised, staring down at the man where he lay groaning on the ground. The boy leaned down and punched him again, knocking the man out cold. Then he turned his attention to me. "Are you alright?" he asked.

I barely managed a nod. I gulped in air. My dog, apparently recovered from his own bout of unconsciousness, walked over and sniffed the man on the ground.

"Let's get you to Rebecca's, then," the boy said. He turned and reached into the pockets of the man on the ground. Apparently coming up with nothing, he shook his head in disgust. "Lousy drunk," he said. Then he began to walk away toward the town. When I didn't follow, he turned and asked, "Well? Aren't you coming?"

“Where?”

“To Rebecca’s?” he asked. He seemed impatient, and somewhat surprised I wasn’t ready to follow a boy I’d just met into the darkness of Southwark in the middle of the night.

“Who is Rebecca?” I asked, still guarded. He wasn’t making a move to hurt me at all, and he had just saved me from potentially being beaten bloody, but I still wasn’t in a hurry to tryst him.

The boy sighed. He seemed younger than all the others, smaller and more slim. “She said she met you,” he said. “She’s the baker you talked to on your first day, when you were asking for . Thought you might get into a spot of trouble, going about on your own, so she told us to watch out for you.”

Rebecca. I remembered her, the female baker on the street I went down. “Why does she want to watch out for me?”

The boy shrugged. “She takes care of all of us,” he said simply. “And I’ll be quite happy to tell you the rest of it, but let’s get to Rebecca’s first, eh? I don’t like our odds out on the street round this time of day.”

Without another word, he turned and walked away, into the darkness of the town. I looked down at my dog, who whined uneasily. I didn’t like my odds out on the street at this time of day, either, and I’d clearly just proved I was useless if it came to physical fighting. And he had just helped me out…

There wasn’t much of a choice, really. I followed him into the town, down the alley between some buildings even though my instincts were shrieking at the closed-in space, then we found ourselves on a brightly-lit street. I felt myself relaxing slightly—it stood to reason that if he were going to attack me, he’d have done it out by the river, in the dark, with nobody around.

A few people walked round at this time of the night, but not many. The boy led me down a couple more side streets, occasionally checking over his shoulder to make sure I was following him. The dog padded at my heels, occasionally whining or growling, but he followed me despite his misgivings, at least.

Finally, we found ourselves at the street I first went to when I arrived in Southwark. Marginally more at ease, I allowed him to lead me into the bakery—Rebecca’s bakery, where I’d been only a week ago. Inside, it was completely dark. “They’re not in,” I told the boy, skeptical all over again. I took a healthy step back from him.

He just gave me a briefly irritated look and waved for me to follow him round the bakery to another door at the back. When he knocked, there were a couple beats of silence, then he knocked again. “I’m coming,” a muffled female voice said, then the door opened to reveal Rebecca, the woman I remembered. Her long brown hair was in a disarray over her shoulders, and she wore a nightgown, but she didn’t seem to care about her state of undress. She looked us up and down, blinking the sleep from her eyes.

“What happened?” she addressed the boy who stood at my side.

“Found him at the river. Some drunk was trying to get his money,” the boy said. “I figured it was time to bring him in.”

She pursed her thin lips. “Fine job, Alexander,” she said. “Come in, both of you. It’s late.”

The boy, Alexander, went in without hesitation. I hovered at the doorway a little longer, unsure. Rebecca said, her tone soothing as my mother’s, “Nobody’s going to hurt you, boy. Come inside and get warm, it’s cold out still.”

I peered inside the doorway. In the darkness I could just barely see a bed, a table and some chairs, and a wardrobe of some sort in the corner. There were several ovens, stoves, and a pantry, presumably for making bread. It was simply furnished. I watched Alexander curl up on the floor in a blanket. I paused a moment longer, then walked in, my dog trotting at my heels. I had nothing to lose, at this point, but a few coins. If someone tried to hurt me, I was confident the dog would wake me up.

“Here’s a blanket,” Rebecca said, offering me a plain white sheet. I wrapped it around myself and curled up on the ground beside Alexander, immediately grateful. Inside, with the sheet, it was far, far warmer than it was spending cold nights on the streets. The puppy circled at my feet a few times before curling up next to my chest.

“We’ll speak in the morning,” Rebecca said. I think I managed to nod, before I was slipping into an exhausted sleep, despite my earlier fears.

In the morning, I woke slowly, unsure of where I was. I smelled the bread first, then I sat up quickly, alarmed. Rebecca stood at one of the ovens, Alexander was nowhere in sight. There was, however, a different boy sitting at the table. Snowy was still drowsy, lying upright. Slowly, the events of last night trickled back to me. “He’s up,” the boy sitting at the table told Rebecca. He looked somewhat pleased. I vaguely recognized him as one of the other boys who had been tailing me.

Apparently at *her* orders, *I thought, looking to the woman standing by the stove. She glanced at me, more to confirm the boy’s words, then she said, “Good morning. Would you like some bread?”*

I rubbed my head, still uncertain of what to do. Rebecca said, “Nobody hurt you, did they? We aren’t going to poison you, either.”

“Oh, no, it isn’t that,” I told her. “I don’t have enough money to pay for it.” I fished out the few remaining coins and held them out to her. She inspected them and took the coins.

“Consider that enough for the rest of your life,” she said.

“I—what? No, that’s not what I—”

“Just have some bread, would you?” the boy at the table asked.

I hesitantly approached and sat down at the table across from him. He stuck out his hand, over the table. “I’m Casey,” he said. I shook his hand, and Rebecca placed some bread in

front of me. I ate it without worrying or thinking about it. I tore off a few pieces to give to the dog who sat beside my chair, and when Rebecca saw this she sighed and gave him an old bone that he happily gnawed on.

"What's your name?" Rebecca asked me after I'd drunk some water and eaten more bread.

I paused and swallowed the mouthful I had. I could hardly say Hannah, and besides, that didn't seem to fit me anymore. Hannah was some other person, not me. Say something! *"Tintin," I said. I had no idea where the name came from.*

Casey stared at me. I felt myself blush. "Tintin," Rebecca said slowly. "Interesting name, don't think I've heard that one."

I looked down at my hands. Dirt was crusted under my nails, and there was hardly an inch of me that wasn't covered in dust from the roads. To distract from the odd name I'd picked out for myself (too late to change it now), I said, "Do you have a bath I can wash up in?"

"Absolutely," Rebecca said. "Do you want to borrow some extra clothes as well? I can wash yours, if you'd like."

I picked at my muddy jumper. By then, it had taken on a sort of brown tint. "I'd like that, thanks," I said. Rebecca took me outside to show me how to feed coal into the hot water heater. I had a difficult time of it at first, struggling to light it, but after a time the furnace roared to light.

*Inside, Casey was standing at the wardrobe, getting dressed and ready to go out. I admired the flat planes of his chest—*Nothing like mine, *I thought. He pulled a shirt on, then turned to leave, nodding at me and Rebecca as he went by.*

"You can pick clothes out of there," Rebecca said, motioning to the wardrobe. "We should have something that fits you."

Half of the wardrobe was dedicated to the clothes of young boys. I chose a small button-up white shirt and plain brown trousers and, at Rebecca's instruction, walked into the curtained toilet, off the house, to change.

The clothes fit surprisingly well, I noted, and thankfully they weren't very tight. I handed my old, dirty clothes to Rebecca, who threw them in the sink. "Normally I use a machine, but not for so few clothes," she explained.

I waited for a few more minutes, then the water was finally warm enough to bathe. "Don't use too much, now," Rebecca cautioned. "I'll take care of your clothes."

I sank into the warm water, allowing the grit and grime of my travels to soak off me. It was a strange, surreal experience, relaxing so easily after so much worry and fear. I felt completely safe and at-home, in this place I'd never been before. I used a bar of soap to clean off completely, then I dried off and got dressed, feeling far better than I had before. I was about to drain the water, then thought better of it. I walked outside and grabbed the puppy, who was still busy chomping on his bone, and placed him in the still-warm water. He wasted no time in

splashing about, but I held him still so I could wash him as well. I was quite surprised to find that he was, in fact, completely and totally white, not gray as I had previously thought. He shook his curly fur dry and ran back into the house for his bone.

"Your clothes are hanging out to dry," Rebecca said. She was busy at the oven again. "While we've both got a moment to spare, I thought we might talk."

"About what?" The relaxed, happy feeling I'd had only moments before dissipated quickly, and I was guarded and worried again.

"About you," she said. Exactly what I'd feared. "Sit," she said, gesturing to the table. I sat down at the table again, feeling my heartbeat rise with alarm. "Where are you from?" she asked.

"I'm from…London," I lied.

To my relief, she accepted it. "Where are your parents?"

"Dead." That much was easy, at least.

This gave her pause. She regarded me from across the table, eyebrows raised. "How long ago?"

"Two weeks."

"I see. And what are you doing in Southwark?"

"I thought I could find a friend of mine and stay with him," I said. I thought of Ben, peaceful and happy at seminary, oblivious to my struggles. "I was mistaken."

"And you've no other family?"

"No," I said. I had aunts and uncles and even grandparents in Hale, but of course those were irrelevant.

"So what are your plans?" she asked. "What will you do here?"

"Write, perhaps," I said. "That's what I'm good at."

Rebecca gazed at me. I felt like she was looking straight through me, like I was a pane of glass. I squirmed slightly in my seat. After a silence that felt like it lasted ten years, she said, "Do you want to stay with me and the other boys?"

"What?" I asked, taken aback at her abrupt offer. She'd only just met me, and now she wanted me to live with her?

"Do you want to live here? I'll shelter you, give you food and water and clothes, so long as you don't cause any trouble and look for work," Rebecca said. "It's clear you're not used to living on the streets, and I couldn't forgive myself if something happened to you."

"It's a very generous offer," I said slowly, choosing my words carefully. "But why?"

She shrugged. "I offer the same to many boys like you," she said. I thought, Boys like *me*? I doubt it. *"I try to do some good for them. And when the time comes, they may leave whenever they please. They don't have to work for me." She paused to assess my wide-eyed stare, before continuing, "Besides, we're more alike than you'd think, you and I."*

I wanted to ask, How so? but didn't want to seem rude to the woman who'd just offered to take care of me. She said, "I used to be named William."

I gazed at her long brown hair, freckled cheeks, and pale skin. "You were a man?" I asked, unsure of how to go about asking such a thing.

She seemed amused at this. Her lips curled into a smile. "Yes, just as you were a girl," she said. "But now you aren't, are you? You're a boy."

"Y-yes," I stammered. Was I? I hadn't given it any thought. Wasn't I just planning on becoming Hannah again, once I didn't have to live on the streets?

Here's my chance, *I thought. I could become her again, let my hair grow out, wear dresses and marry a nice man. I considered it, and came to my conclusion quickly. "Yes," I said, voice firmer. "I am a boy."*

Rebecca kept that same smile on her face. "We'll have to do something about your chest, of course," she said. "Perhaps a length of cloth would do. It'd be bulky, but better than what you have."

I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude. "Thank you," I said in a rush. "Thank you so much."

"Think nothing of it," she told me. "You don't need to make up your mind on whether or not you want to stay just yet. Just consider it." She stood up and glanced at the door leading into the bakery. "I've got to get working, now," she said. "You're welcome to stay in here until your clothes dry. If you want to help, you can wash the bowls I hand you."

I busied myself at the sink for the next hour while she baked bread and sweets for the bakery. It was good work, easily done, and it made me feel some hope for the first time in a while. I'd found something I could do, and now the rest would be easy compared to this.

Waking up is a slow process. I hear low buzzing sounds in my ears, then they gradually dissolve into words. A woman's voice, and a man's. I feel warm. Then light streams in—warm and golden. I close my eyes against it, blink a few times, and I hear the woman say, "She's awake!"

I grimace at the 'she' and try to sit up. My head spins instantly, and I feel someone grab my shoulders. Reflexively, I try to bat the hands away, but I don't have enough strength and I can

barely move as it is. “Where’s the Captain,” I say, my voice weak.

“What?” the man asks. “Hush, you’ve had a bad time of it. Lie still.”

My memories rush back to me. There was the toolshed, and the cut on the back of my leg—I flex my leg and feel pain stab there. “Lenny,” I say. “And Elizabeth’s husband.”

“Lenny? Lenny Walker?” the woman’s voice asks, high and piping.

“They killed her,” I say. “They killed Elizabeth.”

I come into consciousness suddenly. It is as though the world snapped to clarity. A man is bending over me—it takes me only a moment to recognize him as Cal—and a woman stands at my bedside. Cal’s brow is furrowed. It’s almost sunny outside, but the light I’d seen was the fire in the hearth.

“Who killed Elizabeth, Hannah?” he asks.

I want to snap at him about my name, *again*, but criminals are escaping and I can talk to him about it later. “Elizabeth’s husband, he’s the ringleader. There was Lenny Walker and some other men, but I didn’t know them. They killed Elizabeth.” There’s too much to tell them now, I have to keep it simple. I can tell the police about the arms-running later. “I was in a shed, close by here, maybe south. They’re tied up—I left them.” Too much to think about all at once, my head is still spinning. “We have to go, now.”

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Cal says. “I’ll run into town and fetch the policemen and they’ll find them. I think I know what you mean—there’s a small house south of here that might have a toolshed out back.”

“There was another man coming,” I say, remembering. “He’ll have freed them by now, how long was I unconscious?”

“About an hour,” Cal says. He still looks worried. “Really, you ought to have been unconscious far longer, you’re still hurt quite badly.”

“Tell them to go to my mother’s house,” I say. “Get the police, *now*. I can’t go.”

Cal glances at me one last time, then he stands and hurries from the house. “Watch her,” he tells the woman beside my bed.

“*Him*,” I correct, annoyed, but Cal is already out the door and I’m sliding back into the darkness.

When I come to the next time, I’m in a hospital bed, that much is clear instantly. I hadn’t even known that Hale had a hospital. That thought gives me pause. Am I still in Hale? What had happened? Did they get away?

I struggle to push myself up, but I feel a hand on my elbow pulling me down. “You’re alright, Hannah,” I hear Cal say. “It’s alright. We got them. We got them all. The police are absolutely stunned.”

As relieving as the rest of that is to hear, I snap, “My name is Tintin,” for what feels like the hundredth time.

“You don’t have to pretend anymore,” Cal tells me, like he’s trying to be reassuring. “It’s alright—”

“Would you just listen to me?” I ask, cutting Cal off. “I’m not pretending, and it’s not alright. I’m not Hannah, and I’m never going to be her again. I don’t understand why you can’t call me by my name.”

There’s a moment of silence, then Cal stands and pats the bed beside my shoulder. “Good luck,” he says, but his movements are stiff and his words are terse. In my blurry vision, I see him walk away.

Exhausted from my outburst, I drift back into sleep. I’m too tired and my head hurts too much to think about what this means for Cal or me. When I wake the third time, there are more people—my mother, Samantha, Joanne and Lucy and Ben. And right beside me, one very tired-looking thirty-year-old mariner, and an overly-excited little white dog.

“Tintin!” Haddock says when I open my eyes. He very nearly smothers me in a hug. Snowy immediately jumps on me, licking my face and wagging his stump of a tail. I laugh and rub him behind his ears. My mother smiles at the sight.

“Don’t you ever frighten me like that again, do you understand?” the Captain asks, putting his hands on either side of my face. “I’ve been running all over the countryside looking for you!”

I chuckle. “I’ll do my best,” I tell him, though we both know that’s probably only optimistic thinking.

“We had to piece some of it together, but they would have gotten away if it weren’t for you,” Lucy says, smiling at me.

“All I did was get captured by two very bad captors,” I tell her, trying to sound as though I didn’t come out on the worse side of the fight.

Haddock ruffles my hair. “Always modest,” he jokes, eyes twinkling.

“Cal ran to the police and called them to Hale. They caught the men just as they were leaving,” Samantha says, beaming. “Then they explained that they’d forced a fake confession out of me.”

I nod, trying to take it all in. “Where are they now?”

“In jail, with Drake,” Lucy chips in. She rubs a hand over her rounded belly. “They were quick to sell him out.”

“Who would have thought,” Joanne says, shuddering.

“It’s all taken care of, Tintin,” Ben says brightly. In that one sentence, there’s more than I could have ever hopes for.

That’s when the nurse comes in and shoos everyone out, talking about how I need rest since I’m still hurt and tired. Everyone laughs and jokes and walks out together, all except the Captain. He bends over me and presses a quick kiss to my forehead once everyone is out of the room. “I love you, you reckless, hare-brained lad,” he says.

“I love you, too,” I answer, and there’s nothing more that needs to be said.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! It's been a long ride. The next chapter will be...the last one! Just as a short little epilogue sort of thing. I really appreciate all of you who have stayed with this fic and put up with my awful update schedule. It means a lot to me that you guys kept reading and gave me feedback. If I continue in this vein I'll probably get a bit too sentimental, so let's leave it at, THANK YOU ALL SO, SO MUCH!!! I very much hope you've enjoyed it.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I must say, I'm impressed," Rebecca said, holding up the morning newspaper. I was at the table, downing breakfast as fast as I could before my train to Marylebone, in the heart of London. My dog sat beside me, tail wagging and tongue lolling. Only a month ago, he was a half-starved little dirty thing, and now he's bright-eyed, healthy and growing. I smiled at the thought that we'd made much the same transition in that regard.

Rebecca continued, "Only been here a month, and you uncovered one of the biggest scandals in the town's history. Well done!"

"It isn't anything, really," I said with an embarrassed smile. In my search for stories to cover, I'd stumbled upon questionable money use by Southwark's mayor, written a story about it, and the paper did all the rest.

"Oh, are we talking about the famous Tintin again?" Alexander asked, coming back in from lighting up the water heater. He ruffled my short hair, then reached down to scratch my dog behind the ears. "Snowy little scamp, you are," he said to the dog, then he continued walking past us to the wardrobe. "All packed for the big trip?"

I nodded. "I've everything in a case, now," I said.

Rebecca clucked. "We'll miss you, boy," she said.

"Sorry, ma'am, the city's calling," I said with a broad grin.

"What he means is, it'll be nice making his own money so he never has to eat your cooking again," Alexander piped up, earning a dirty look from our caretaker.

Amidst my laughter, Rebecca retorted, "Well, he isn't getting out of it just yet—I've packed him quite a bit of food for the trip."

"Too bad for Tintin, then," Casey said, walking into the room. Rebecca swatted him over the head as he passed, and he responded with a vague grunt.

I've gotten used to the warmth of this house, *I thought, looking around at everyone bustling around the room. I knew all the boys—eight or so—though I saw Casey and Alexander most often. But it was time to go, and I knew I must. I had an interview in Marylebone with a journalist who wanted to know just how a fifteen-year-old boy pulled off such a story (in exchange for the interview, he promised to teach me the tricks of the trade).*

I checked the clock on the wall, stood from the table, and walked back to my corner of the house. I didn't have much, only a few changes of clothes, and I'd left room for some of Rebecca's promised cooking to take with me on the train.

“Is it that time?” Rebecca asked. “I’m sorry I can’t walk you to the station, I’m a bit behind today, dear.”

“It’s perfectly alright, thank you,” I told her, gathering my case. I still had to buy a ticket, it was best to leave early. Rebecca hurried over, holding a couple of sandwiches and what appeared to be a whole loaf of bread. When I tried to tell her she’d done so much for me already, she shook her head and proceeded to help me open my suitcase so she could stuff the food inside.

“Can’t believe you’re going to the big city,” Casey said, catching me in a hug as I made my way to the door. He passed me off to Alexander, who nearly pressed the breath from my lungs.

“Stay safe, Tintin,” he said with a broad grin. Everyone in that room knew I’d no intentions of doing any such thing.

Finally, it was Rebecca’s turn. She hugged me, and I thought of the way our chests met—mine rounded where it should be flat, while hers was flat where it should be round. Then she pulled back to kiss me on the cheek, and I pushed the thought from my mind. I was a boy, she was a woman. These were truths of the world that shouldn’t be questioned.

“Do us proud,” Rebecca said with a chuckle.

“I’ll do my best,” I told her with a warm smile. I put on my cap, a gift from Alexander that may have been fished out of the river, and looked round the little room one last time. I’d made friends here, felt acceptance for the first time in my life, laughed and lived here for a whole month, and I would miss it. It was strange to willingly leave such a comforting place behind for the unknown, but somehow it felt right, just as it had when I was leaving my home in Hale. Rebecca and her bakery were a home to me, but they weren’t my home.

I waved goodbye to Casey, Alexander, and Rebecca, and began the walk to the train station, my little dog following at my heels. I would miss them, of course, but their home was in Southwark with Rebecca. It seemed my dog would be the one companion I could count on for the rest of my days, and for some reason, that thought left no trace of sadness or loneliness.

It was a quick walk to the station, and nobody questioned me when I asked for one ticket to Marylebone, please. In my plus-fours, I looked like any other boy my age. I’d stopped worrying about what people must have thought when they saw me, I finally fit in (I’d fit in better if I could grow even a bit of a beard, but nothing for that).

Aboard the train, I had the compartment to myself. I listened to the crashing and grinding sounds of the train beginning its journey, then I leaned against the window, beginning to doze off in the warmth of the rising sun. My dog curled up at my side, and I ruffled his white ears.

“Say goodbye to Southwark, Snowy dog,” I told him. He licked my hand and rested his head on the seat.

I turned my head to gaze out the window, at all the scenery rushing by. It had seemed so slow when I was walking the roads a month ago, and there I was travelling it by train. I’d never

have guessed I could make it this far. Once again, I was surprised at the greenery of the countryside, and how different it was from Hale.

I've a whole lifetime to see all of this, *I thought, gazing at the different sights passing my window. It felt like dreaming, like the things I'd thought of trapped in my etiquette lessons back in Hale. My parents and childhood home felt like nothing more than a distant memory. I had my little snowy dog at my side, and I knew I could make it on my own now. I thought,* I can see all I want to, of the whole world.

I find myself back in Hale around two weeks after the case had ended and the arrests had been made. I'd have come back to do this sooner, but Haddock insisted that I stay in bed and recover so I wouldn't tear the stitches in my leg by running off the first thing. I protested, at the time, but he was firm in his insistence that I didn't exert myself. I think he might've secretly enjoyed playing nurse.

I stand at my father's grave, a bouquet of flowers pressed in my hand. The Gypsies helped me pick them from the Marlinspike grounds, much to Nestor's dismay, and they reminded me of when I was young, before it all went bad, and I took bunches of wildflowers to my father's study. *He was always so pleased,* I recall.

"I wasn't lying about him asking for you, in his last moments," Mother tells me. She stands beside me, gazing down at the tombstone. "He did want to see you. He said he understood."

I gently lay the flowers on the grass. "Sometimes, when I'm here, I half-expect him to pop out of the next room, yelling about my clothes," I admit with a chuckle.

Mother smiles. "Yes, he wouldn't have taken to it well," she says. "But for all his faults, he was a good man, you know."

I simply nod. We're alone in the early morning, when the mist still hangs low over the ground and the sky is gray. The Captain is watching Snowy, back at Marlinspike. This moment is private between my mother and I.

"After you left, he broke it off with the other woman," Mother says. I'm startled, I'd nearly forgotten that. She continues, "He didn't tell me until much later, of course. But he blamed himself a bit, for making you leave like that. I suppose we both should have recognized the signs."

"It was nobody's fault," I say. "I left because I had to. I wasn't happy."

"I know," Mother says, and that's the end of it. I know better than to continue with the subject —what's done is done, and we can deal with the pieces. With one final look at Father's grave, she turns and begins walking back to my car, through the mist. Her shoes, flat, sensible shoes, make the grass squelch slightly as she steps on it.

“Mother?” I ask her, jogging slightly to catch up with her. I do have a bit of a limp, though it’s barely noticeable and gets better with each day.

“Hmm?”

“I was wondering—while I was on bedrest, there was one thing I couldn’t get out of my mind,” I say. “Lucy told me you’d been experiencing hallucinations, all the women had. What was that?”

Mother doesn’t even pause in walking. “A derivative of opium,” she says, as if that explains it all. At my baffled frown, she continues, “We found a small vial of powder in the pantry. It causes hallucinations, such as the ones we were having. All the women in the house, I and the maids, had terrifically vivid nightmares about demons and winged creatures.”

“Of course! Elizabeth’s husband must have given it to her,” I say, catching on. The final mystery falls into place. “Then, if you saw a man slipping in and out of your mirror, if they were accidentally indiscreet, you’d have dismissed it as another nightmare. She must have put it in all your food, everyone who worked and lived inside the house.”

“Well done,” Mother says dryly. “A bit slow, perhaps. I was beginning to doubt my d—my *son’s* intelligence.”

I stumble at that, but Mother takes no notice. I have to catch up with her again, and I can’t prevent the smile on my face. We get into the car, and I drive her back home. When I walk round the car to open the door for her, she catches my hand and says, “Callum hasn’t been round lately. I think he might quit.”

My mood is dampened. “Oh?” I ask, keeping my voice strictly neutral. I haven’t seen or heard from Cal since the hospital, and everyday I wonder if that’s for the better or the worse.

Mother nods and says, “I don’t know what happened, but I can guess. Perhaps he’ll come around eventually. We’re all doing our best, you know.” She steps onto the gravel drive. “It’ll take us all some time.”

“I know,” I say. Lucy had called me up at Marlinspike as soon as I’d been released from the hospital, and she’d stumbled a bit with saying ‘Tintin’ instead of Hannah, this morning my mother had almost called me her daughter, then switched to son. It’s all a start, and I can wait.

Mother walks up the steps to the house, looking very small for perhaps the first time I’ve known her. Just before she walks into the house, however, she turns and asks, “Are you happy, Tintin?”

I think of Captain Haddock, Snowy, Thompson and Thomson, and all the other friends I’ve made along the way. I think of Marlinspike and my little flat, my two homes where I’m most comfortable. “I am,” I tell her, trying to push these people and these places into the two words.

Mother smiles at me, and behind her the door opens. Samantha stands there, smiling out at me and waving. I wave back. “You’d better come visit sometime!” Mother calls to me.

Samantha vigorously nods in agreement.

I chuckle. To think that this place once filled me with absolute dread, and now I can come and go as I please, with the Captain and Snowy at my side if I so wish. “Of course!” I answer.

They both look pleased, then they walk into the house. Samantha shuts the door with one final wave of her hand, and they’re gone. I consider what Haddock would say if I proposed a holiday at my mother’s, and grin at the thought. I get back in the car and begin the drive back to Marlinspike, where I’ve been staying during my recovery.

Nestor greets me in the drive. “Mr. Tintin, going home soon?” he asks. Though his face is impassive as ever and his words are a bit blunt, I think I catch a bit of amusement in his eyes. He knows full well why I’ve come back here instead of going home, and though he doesn’t entirely approve of it, he knows better than to bring it up. Besides, it seems he’s just happy he doesn’t have to clean up quite as many whiskey bottles.

“Afraid so, Nestor,” I tell the butler. “But there are some things I’ve got to wrap up.”

“Very well,” he says, and escorts me back into the house. I imagine I see something of a smile on his face. Inside, Snowy comes bounding to greet me, as always, and the Captain appears nearly immediately to make some grumpy comment about how he thought I would faint and wind up in a ditch somewhere.

“Good to see you too, Captain,” I say, with a good-natured smile in return to his frown. I give him a quick peck on the cheek above his beard, and though this has become our routine now, a slight blush still creeps up his face. My ears share the same rosy tint, judging by the feeling of heat in them. I wonder if that will ever stop, and I think, *I don’t know if I want it to.*

Nestor glides away to the kitchen, the picture of stateliness as ever, and the Captain and I walk upstairs to my room to pack up some of my clothes. “How did things go with your mother?” he asks.

“Well, actually,” I say. “She called me her son.”

Haddock positively beams. “Well, lad,” he says, “That’s something, isn’t it? And I had to drag you there, in fact.”

I laugh and say, “Kicking and screaming, as I recall.”

“And now, look, you’ve patched things together with your mother, and it’s all smooth sailing,” Haddock says, gesturing out into the hallway as if it’s a blue ocean.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t get such a big head, now,” I warn him jokingly.

“Dragging you there was almost all the battle!” Haddock says. “I deserve a little credit, at least.”

“Oh, come off it,” I laugh. When he just presses his lips together like he’s trying to suppress a smile, I throw my hands into the air, defeated. “Yes, if I have to say it, thank you for dragging me, kicking and screaming, to my childhood home.”

Haddock fully grins. “Why, you’re quite welcome!”

I playfully shove his shoulder. He barely stumbles on the tiled flooring, of course, and he laughs at the expression on my face. By this time, we’re standing outside my room, and I open the door and walk in. “You could stay, you know,” the Captain offers as I begin walking around my room, gathering up my things.

I remember him making me the same offer, not so long ago. It feels like it’s been years since. So much has changed. I consider his offer, hesitating with my hand wrapped around one of my shirts. “I’ve got my own place,” I tell him, after a bit. “I like it there, and I like having space to call my own. It’s close to you, and it’s close to my friends, and my job.”

The Captain rolls his eyes. “Lad, your job is everywhere in the blasted world, and beyond,” he says, but he doesn’t sound very let-down. I get the feeling that, as well as he knows me, he’s probably expecting it.

“Besides, as much as I love you, I don’t like looking at your face *all* the time,” I joke, sliding my shirt into a pack. Snowy, sitting on the bed, barks agreement. The Captain looks indignant.

“Well, cheeky little bugger, I don’t know if I want to look at your little smug face all the time either!” he says, and I chuckle at his affronted scowl. Without thinking about it, I stand up on my tiptoes, press my hands to the sides of his bearded face, and pull his lips onto mine.

Haddock immediately relaxes. We stand like this a moment. It’s not exactly chaste, but it isn’t quite indecent, either. I can’t put a name or a single word to this sort of kiss. When he pulls back, or I do, we’re both blushing red. The Captain, his face inches from mine, raises an eyebrow at me. “That’s new, lad,” he says, voice low.

I hadn’t thought it was possible, but I feel my ears redden further. We’ve never done anything past quick kisses on the forehead or cheek, and this *is* something new, surely. A sign something has changed between us. “The case is over,” I remind him.

“As if I forgot,” Haddock says. Snowy curls up on the bed with a loud, tired yawn, and the Captain and I both laugh slightly.

We still haven’t moved. His breath smells like whiskey, his beard tickles my chin, and for the first time, I don’t quite mind that I don’t have anything there. “Are you sure you’re…ready?” the Captain asks. It’s a bit hard to tell since we’re so close together, but I think he might even look nervous. Strange expression on him.

I close my eyes. I want to tell him that I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life, I want to tell him that of course I am. I love him, this is it. Then he begins talking again, quick and low and his words collide with my nose. “I know we talked about it, and you said you’d consider a relationship when you were done with the case because it was too much to think about, and I could hardly believe a man like you would want me, and thundering typhoons if I ever try to—”

“Captain,” I say, effectively quieting him. His eyes are big and worried, and I hope that my next words can take the worry out. “Be quiet.”

I press my lips to his again, and this time, it is gentle, sweet, calm. Haddock would probably compare it to drifting on a boat, I’d compare it to a peaceful jaunt through the countryside, because of course I, a world-renowned journalist, still can’t put words to these kinds of things.

Packing has been forgotten. The Captain moves his head back to give me a wide grin. “So… yes?”

I smile at that. As if he has to ask.

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

THE LAST CHAPTER. Moderately on-time, actually I'm pretty pleased with myself for even getting it done before midnight. A procrastinator to the end!
Well, I really hope you guys liked it! As I said last chapter, I truly appreciate all your comments and feedback and encouragement, you have all pushed me on to finish this and without you, it'd probably be in my Recycle bin right now. So THANK YOU, a million times over, for reading to the end of this and sticking with me through vacations, technical difficulties, illness, and my own poor time management. I really, really hope you guys liked the finale just as much as you liked the rest of it!! See you next time, cheers! :) <3

End Notes

I'm doing my best with historical context and what I know, but if anybody sees something that isn't right or you think is unrealistic, feel free to let me know. All critiques welcome.

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